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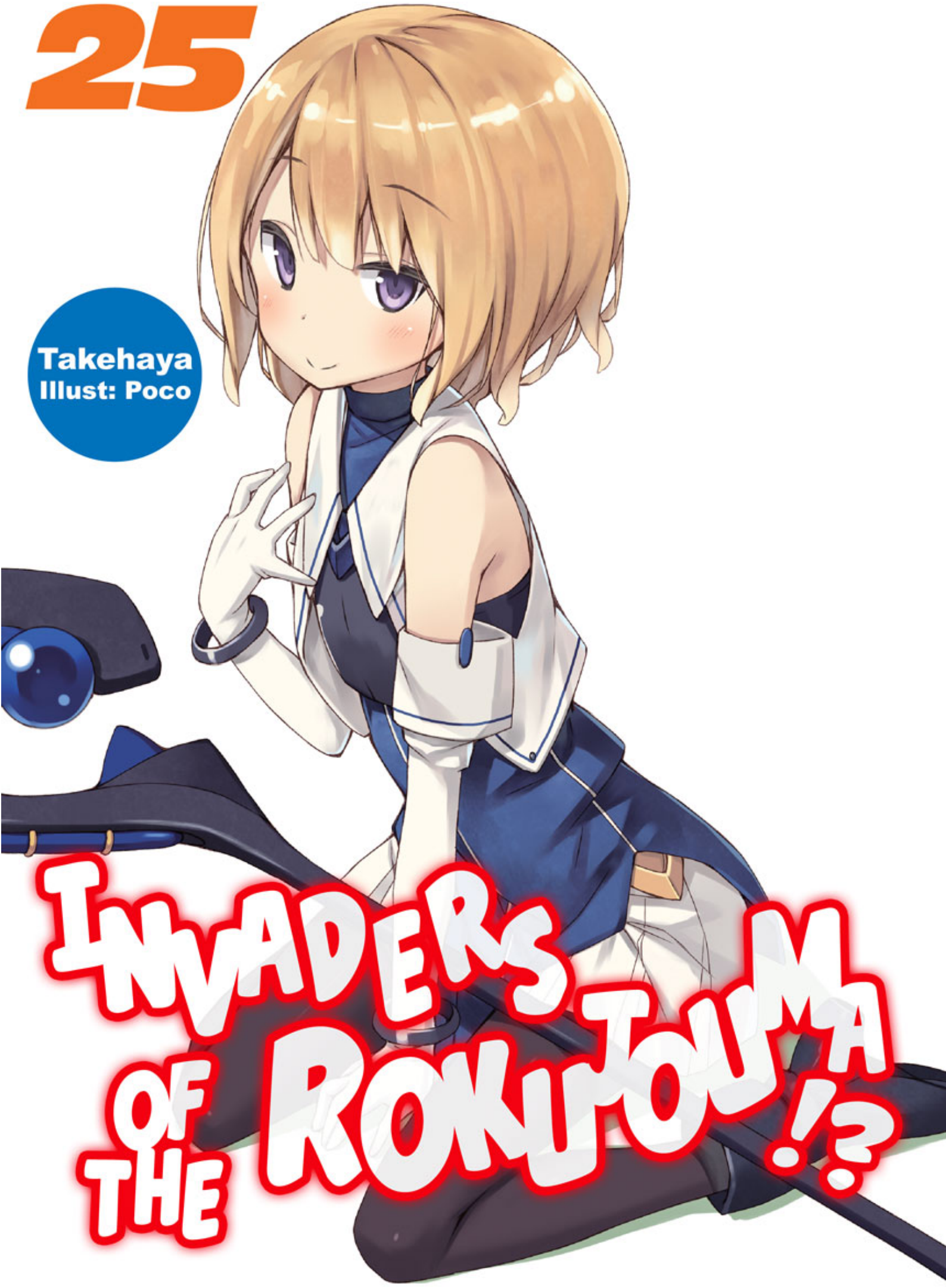


Invaders of the Rokujouma!?

The Truth Behind Signaltin

Saturday, December 4th

The Reborn Forthorthian Army's next goal was to get a lead on DKI and Darkness Rainbow. It would be a necessary step to preventing Vandarion's side from launching surprise attacks using magic, which would be critical to ensuring their continued success and safety. Defending an entire army from such ambushes was far too much for just Yurika, Maki, and Nana.

But in order to proceed, it meant that Koutarou and the others would need to leave the planet. They didn't think Elexis and his allies would show their faces on Alaia again. And so finding them or more information on them would mean going elsewhere in the Forthorthian solar system—likely to Planet Forthorthe, home to DKI headquarters. But before the army could get back into space, they needed to seize the military bases around the spaceport and gain control of the airspace and orbits above it. Koutarou and the others were currently in the middle of putting the final touches on that.

"Hey, Koutarou."

A hologram of Theia's face appeared before Koutarou. She looked rather unhappy, so Koutarou put down the luggage he was carrying. Something told him Theia was more important than transporting supplies right now.

"What?"

The supplies Koutarou was carrying were materials for the construction of an outpost. He had been tasked with going out and building a temporary one as part of a larger operation.

"How long do you expect me to do this?"

"I know how you feel, but the enemy is less likely to attack with you waving that flag around."

The area around the spaceport was almost fully under the control of the Reborn Forthorthian Army now. However, in the regions where they had yet to establish control, there was still the danger of the Imperial Army scrambling fighters or firing missiles, so the Reborn Forthorthian Army

was constructing simple outposts near enemy bases to keep an eye on their movements. From there, they would be able to survey for sortied fighters or shoot down incoming projectiles. And since the Imperial Army knew there was no meaning in launching an attack that would be quashed immediately, observation outposts like these were even useful as a preventative measure in that they decreased the odds of an attack in the first place.

While the outposts were an important asset to the Reborn Forthorthian Army, the charge of their construction fell to those who couldn't contribute much to the preparations for the journey into space. Namely Koutarou and Theia.

"Grrr... Then hurry it up!"

"As you wish, my princess."

The division of labor was simple. Theia's forces would provide defense from the sky while Koutarou's forces actually constructed the outpost. However, even though Theia and her troops were on guard, the enemy wasn't actually attacking. And with no real threat afoot, she had too much time on her hands. Koutarou smiled wryly at the increasingly anxious Theia while contemplating how strange it was that the Imperial Army hadn't tried to interfere yet. And with that thought, he turned to his staff officer, Maki, who had come along with them.

"Don't get me wrong, Aika-san. It's a good thing that Theia's got nothing to do, but... why isn't the Imperial Army attacking? These are just simple outposts, but they shouldn't be just letting us do as we please, right?"

"Well... I can think of three reasons for it," Maki answered with a giggle. Having come from a pseudo-military organization like Darkness Rainbow, she had a certain insight into these matters. "The first is that they had no plans to attack to begin with. This is on the very edge of the airspace under their control."

"I see. If that's the case, there's a high chance that the base commander is a local and would like to avoid fighting if possible."

“Yes. For that or any number of other reasons, they may have never had any intention to attack. That’s one possible explanation as to why Theia-san has nothing to do.”

“That sounds plausible.”

The chances of the Imperial Army bases launching attacks on the planet’s spaceport was low. That was why the Reborn Forthorthian Army—or rather, Kiriha—had decided to construct temporary outposts in favor of attacking themselves. If the Imperial Army wasn’t willing to go after bigger targets like the spaceport, why would they even bother with small outposts? It would feel like a waste. Koutarou could understand that much.

“Then what about the other possibilities?” he asked.

“The second is something that Kiriha-san predicted, but there’s a chance that Vandarion’s side is pulling back.”

“What do you mean?”

“As our forces grow larger, it becomes harder and harder to protect each base.”

“I see. Because we all come in at the same time.”

Whereas the attacking forces only had to be focused and on their game while they were making a move, a typical disadvantage of being on the defensive was that it required constant vigilance. Moreover, the Imperial Army had a lot of bases to protect. Elfaria’s Reborn Forthorthian Army could choose any one of them and attack when it suited them. So while Vandarion might have superior numbers in his forces overall, the Reborn Forthorthian Army had them outnumbered when they moved on individual bases. It was ultimately an effect of public opinion shifting in Elfaria’s favor. The Reborn Forthorthian Army was growing by the day.

“That’s right. So they’re going to give up on protecting the entirety of Alaia and focus their forces elsewhere. They have the numbers, so they’ll want to find an opening and defeat Elfaria-san and Theia-san in a major, decisive battle.”

“So because protecting a big area is disadvantageous, they’re willingly give it up so they can focus their forces on other things, huh?”

“At this rate, they’re fighting a losing battle here. It’s bad for reputation and morale.”

“Which means... that the base here only has a skeleton crew. They probably wouldn’t even have enough troops to attack if they wanted to.”

“Yes, that could very well be the case.”

It was possible Vandarion was cutting his losses on Alaia and moving most of his troops to new locations. It would leave the bases there undermanned, meaning that the Reborn Forthorthian Army would likely take most of them. But when that happened, it would put the onus of defending the bases on them, in turn making it easier for the Imperial Army to attack. As the Reborn Forthorthian Army was stretched thinner and thinner, it would only weaken their defenses, and that would include at the base where Elfaria and Theia stayed. In that state, the Imperial Army might be planning on finishing them off in one reckless but fell swoop. That could be the second reason they weren’t attacking just yet.

“Hmm, you might be right there. Then what about the third possibility?”

“Hehehe...”

As Koutarou asked about the last potential reason, Maki only answered with a laugh. Realizing Koutarou clearly didn’t understand what was so amusing to her, Maki tilted her head and put her hand on his chest.

“That would be you, Satomi-kun.”

“Me?”

“Yes. They’re afraid of you. If the Golden Princess is flying around above, surely the knight in blue armor is on the ground below. Could they possibly defeat the knight that took down a mechanical dragon? They probably wouldn’t dare attack. Especially not if they’re moving their forces too.”

Koutarou himself was the third reason. While the belief that the Blue Knight had returned won the hearts of the public, it struck fear into the hearts of the Imperial Army soldiers. Koutarou’s reputation preceded him at this point. He’d done more than enough to prove his strength. And the

Imperial Army knew that. They weren't foolish enough to pick a fight they couldn't possibly win.

"If so, they're overestimating me. I'm not all that impressive."

"But your weakness is a secret only we know."

"What a pathetic secret, really..."

The image of Harumi unconscious in the ICU popped into Koutarou's mind. If he had been a little stronger, she might not have ended up like that. Having the Imperial Army fear him felt like a cruel irony.

"Even so, Satomi-kun... We're all in this for you. No one else would do."

Maki understood what was going on in Koutarou's head. As she specialized in mind manipulation magic, she was especially sensitive to the moods of others. But that wasn't the only reason. Her relationship with Koutarou was deep. She knew him well, and it was clear that Koutarou was upset about Harumi. That's why Maki did her best to express her feelings and cheer him up.

"You all have bad taste. There are plenty of better men out there."

"Those people won't need us. We need you, who needs us, Satomi-kun."

Koutarou had a big goal, and in order to accomplish that, he needed the help of Maki and the others. That made Maki happy. While she couldn't exactly say it in the middle of a war and while Harumi was in the ICU, Maki wouldn't trade the feeling of being needed by her beloved in his time of need for anything in the world.

On the flip side, Maki and the others needed Koutarou too. He understood those needs and provided for each of them. In Maki's case, that was simply the warmth of others. And because he had given her that, she would choose him over any other man, no matter the circumstances. That was the essence of how she really felt.

"...That makes me feel a little better."

"I'm happy to be of help. Hehehe..."

Koutarou sighed and a small smile appeared on his lips. Maki was trying to tell him that he wasn't in a one-sided relationship. Things like needing each other were just part of the deal. Maki's earnest words lifted a great weight from Koutarou's shoulders. Sensing his relief, a smile returned to Maki's face too. She was happy to know she was being useful.

"Sorry to interrupt when you're having fun."

That was when Theia's hologram suddenly cut between Koutarou and Maki. It was enough to startle them both.

"Kyah!"

"Wh-What now?!"

"Could I trouble you to get back to building the outpost? How long do you expect me to fly around up here?"

Theia gave the two of them a dirty look. While keeping watch from the skies was draining, she also didn't want to be left out.

"I'm sorry, Theia-san."

"Yeah, sorry. So stop making that face. You're wasting your good looks."

"I won't be fooled by flattery!"

Krsht!

Communications were abruptly cut. Theia then made a wide turn in the air and passed directly over Koutarou and Maki.

"Looks like she's really angry now..."

"Hehehe! Oh Theia-san..."

Maki had realized something that Koutarou hadn't. Theia's last words were merely her way of hiding her embarrassment. In fact, Maki was probably the only one that could tell that rather than a sign of aggression, Theia's aerial performance was a sign she was in a fantastic mood.

With construction of the outpost complete, Koutarou and company returned to base. They had only been in charge of the site deemed to have

the highest risk of being attacked. And with their job done, the soldiers in charge of operating the temporary outpost had already gotten to work. Having returned in their stead, they would probably be given a new mission before too long.

“So how is Sakuraba-senpai?”

Once they returned, Koutarou and the others headed straight for the ICU where Harumi was. They met up with Clan on the way, who explained what was going on. Since she was the one in charge of treating Harumi, she had the best handle on the situation.

“She’s still unconscious, but her condition has stabilized.”

“She’s not going to stay asleep forever, is she?”

“I believe she’ll be fine. Sanae said that there was nothing abnormal with her brain waves, so we can be sure of that much,” explained Clan.

“Well, that’s a relief...” said Koutarou.

“Jeez,” Theia sighed.

“That’s great news,” Maki said with a faint smile.

While the three of them were visibly relieved, Clan still had a stern expression. She hadn’t told them everything yet.

“What is it, Clan?” Koutarou asked.

He’d realized she was acting strangely. As he looked at her and waited for an answer, she seemed to make up her mind about something, and then looked back at Koutarou with a serious look in her eyes.

“Actually, Veltlion, when I was examining Harumi, I came across a major problem.”

“A problem? What do you mean? Is Sakuraba-senpai in trouble?”

“That’s not what I mean. Like I said before, her condition is stable. But I’ve discovered how Harumi ended up like this, and it’s pretty complicated...”

“Tell me everything!”

Koutarou couldn’t stay quiet or sit idly by when it came to Harumi’s health. She’d always been an upperclassmen he respected, but in this situation, he knew he was the one that had put such strain on her. Because of that, the tone in his voice was more serious than usual.

“I was going to, of course, but I’d like to tell you when everyone’s together. It’s a problem that will affect us all going ahead.”

“Then let’s hurry.”

Koutarou anxiously rushed to the ICU. Everyone else should be waiting for them there, and they were most likely feeling the same way he did.

The ICU was in the back of the medical office. When he entered the facility, Koutarou could see Harumi lying on a bed through the glass window to the room where she was resting. She had an oxygen mask over her face and appeared to be in a deep slumber.

“Sakuraba-senpai!”

Seeing Harumi looking so frail, Koutarou instinctively called to her.

“Calm down, Satomi-kun. Sakuraba-senpai will wake up,” said Shizuka.

“S-Sorry...”

Shizuka’s words returned Koutarou to his senses. He was so focused on Harumi that he hadn’t even seen the other girls in the room. Shizuka had been the first to say anything to Koutarou, but everyone else was there too. Kiriha seemed to be deep in thought, Ruth was gently watching over Harumi, Yurika was helplessly in tears, and Sanae was by Harumi’s side, apparently sending her spiritual energy. In the corner of the room was Nana working away on a computer, accompanied by Elfaria, who had a rarely seen serious expression on her face. Each of them was worried for Harumi in their own way.

“It looks like everyone is here now,” said Clan, the last one to enter the room after Koutarou, Theia, and Maki.

Clack.

For some reason, Clan locked the sliding door behind her and then started doing something with the computer in the room.

“What are you doing, Clan?” Koutarou asked.

“What I’m about to share with you is confidential, so I’m taking the necessary precautions.”

Clan was serious. She’d shut the door so no one could overhear and was double checking the computer to make sure no one was recording anything in order to make sure their conversation wouldn’t leave the room.

“Is it that problematic?”

“Yes. It’s a serious problem. And a rather delicate one. That’s why I want to keep it between just us for the time being.”

After finishing up on the computer, Clan returned to the center of the room. Her expression was quite severe. She wasn’t happy about what she was about what she was about to tell everyone, but she knew that she needed to. Not as a scientist, but as Harumi’s friend.

“So keep that in mind. Please make sure this conversation doesn’t get outside of the people in this room right now.”

Clan turned to the group. She was about to tell them the truth. The truth behind the girl known as Sakuraba Harumi. The truth about the wish that had made it all possible.

“I’ll get right to the point.”

Clan looked at each and every one of their faces as she spoke, all ten of them apart from herself and Harumi. There were twenty eyes all staring at her anxiously awaiting what she was about to say.

“More than half of Harumi’s life is within Signaltin itself. And because of that, her body is growing weaker. This time, because she used too much power, the deficit is being drained from her.”

And with those words, many of the twenty eyes shot open wide in surprise. There was a collective gasp. Of course, the most surprised of all was Signaltin’s owner, Koutarou.

“What do you mean?! Explain everything!”

“There are some assumptions mixed in. Do you still want to hear it even then?”

Right now it was hard for Clan to say that she had a solid backing for her claim. She had only just reached this hypothesis after analyzing the vast data gained from her own examinations, the haniwas’ spiritual energy sensors, Sanae’s intuition, and the magicians’ spells.

“That’s fine! Just tell me!”

“Then... you’re aware that Signaltin is different from other magical weapons, right?”

“Yeah. It’s clearly different from a magical staff or Nana-san’s guns.”

The staff that Koutarou had brought with him from the past, Encyclopedia. The guns that Nana used, Over the Rainbow. They were powerful magical weapons, but they were no match for Signaltin.

“The reason for that difference is something unique to the way Signaltin works. By incorporating a portion of the life force of the person that awakened it, it seems to amplify the mana within.”

Signaltin would be powerful even as an ordinary magical sword, but it used the life force of the person who had awakened it to dramatically increase those powers. That’s why Signaltin was on a completely different level from the magical weapons and tools Koutarou and the others had encountered before. And up until now, they were unaware that the overwhelming power of the sword carried with it great risk.

“Then you’re saying that Her Majesty Alaia gave half of her life for my sake?!”

“All the data seems to lead to that conclusion, yes.”

“While we can’t directly observe the life force within the sword, we estimate that roughly 70 percent of a normal adult’s life force is inside the sword based on its aura, ho! It seems like Alaia-chan had an abundance of life force, ho!”

“Comparing that aura to Harumi’s, the sword is at 110 percent, ho! So from that we can assume that over half of her life is inside of it, ho!”

“Your Majesty, you would go that far for my sake... No, wait, that doesn’t make sense!”

Learning that Alaia had sacrificed half of her life to awaken Signaltin came as a great shock to Koutarou. That was how far she was willing to go to protect him. That alone would be enough to leave him extremely shaken if the circumstances were different, but right now Harumi’s life was on the line. So for the time being, he put his thoughts of Alaia aside and focused

on the matter at hand. And that was what seemed to be a great flaw in Clan's theory.

"Her Majesty Alaia was the one who gave half her life to the sword, right?! So why is Sakuraba-senpai's in it?!"

Alaia was the one who had revived the sword and given it half of her life. That's why the sword had been crowned with Alaia's name. And while the sword was still Signaltin, Harumi's life was supposedly the one in it now. It simply didn't add up.

"That's..." Clan hesitated.

What she was about to say was hard to admit as a scientist. But even so, it still needed to be said. She was Harumi's friend first and foremost right now, and so she steeled herself.

"That's because Harumi *is* Alaia. She was most likely brought to your side because her life force within Signaltin."

Thanks to the magicians, Sanae, and the haniwas, Clan was able to determine that it was Harumi's spiritual energy within the sword. Despite that, the sword was still Signaltin. It hadn't been crowned with Harumi's name, yet the contract connecting the sword and Harumi was functioning without any problems. In other words, it wasn't that Harumi had inherited Alaia's contract. Rather, the sword was acknowledging Harumi as Alaia. That's why Clan believed that Harumi and Alaia were one and the same.

"How could that be?!"

Koutarou turned to look at Harumi still lying in bed. There had certainly been occasions where Harumi acted like Alaia, but Koutarou believed that was because Harumi had inherited Alaia's duties and a portion of her memories. He had never imagined that she was Alaia herself. That's why he couldn't readily accept what Clan was saying.

"I don't believe it! How could something that convenient be possible?"

"I-I almost don't believe it either! But considering the circumstances, it's the only possibility!"

"Look over things again more carefully! This is—"

“Calm down, Satomi Koutarou.”

Kiriha’s slender hand grabbed his shoulder. Sensing that the excited Koutarou was too much for Clan, Kiriha got in between them. As the wisest one in the room, she understood what Clan was saying. In fact, she understood the meaning of it even better than Clan did.

“I understand that it’s hard to believe, but don’t take it out on Clan-dono. You’re overlooking something.”

“I am?”

“That’s right. Think about it calmly. If Harumi is not the reincarnation of Princess Alaia, that would mean she ended up by your side by complete chance. Could a random girl really have the disposition required to control Signaltin? Does that make any more sense to you?”

“That’s...”

A girl with a soul so close to Alaia’s that Signaltin acknowledged her as Alaia just happened to be by Koutarou’s side. Either that, or Alaia was brought over through Signaltin. When Kiriha put it that way, even Koutarou realized that the latter scenario was far more realistic. It was far too special to have all happened by chance.

“...Sorry, Clan.”

“It’s fine. What you’re feeling is only natural given the subject.”

Koutarou lowered his head to Clan, but she wasn’t angry. That was partially because Koutarou had honestly apologized, but also because she understood that this was a particularly touchy issue for him. As a scientist, she wanted to reject such an incredible claim herself.

“Besides, I’d hate you if you didn’t worry about your friends.”

“Thank you, Clan.”

After making sure things had calmed down between the two of them, Kiriha spoke up again. From this point on, she was the one with the best understanding of the situation.

“If we assume that Harumi is the reincarnation of Princess Alaia, it would explain several mysterious,” she said.

“Mysteries?” Koutarou asked.

“Signaltin was originally a sword belonging to the royal family. There’s no mistake about that, right, Koutarou?”

“Yeah. Over there they called it the sword of royalty and a treasured sword gifted by the divine. That’s why Maxfern was after it. They say whoever holds the sword will hold Forthorthe.”

Koutarou could remember Maxfern’s abnormal obsession with Signaltin because possessing it was considered proof of the ruler of Forthorthe. He even tried to corner Alaia in an attempt to get his hands on it.

“In other words, Alaia herself should have been the one using that sword. That way she could use its power to continually recover, limiting the effect of her life force being taken from her. In simple terms, the user and sword are meant to share the life force between them.”

The life force poured into Signaltin amplified the mana within it. By using that amplified mana, the user could magically stimulate their body and make up for the loss of life force. That process was halted in combat, but since the user would die if they fell at the hands of their enemy anyway, it was of negligible risk comparatively. In short, Signaltin had a symbiotic relationship with its user over the life force within it.

“However, Princess Alaia didn’t do that. She rewrote the contract and revived it as a sword to protect you. That’s where things broke down. That’s how both Princess Alaia and her reincarnation, Harumi, ended up with weak constitutions.”

Signaltin circulated life force and mana between the sword and its user. But because Alaia had given the sword to Koutarou, she was unable to access the mana that was intended for her recovery. That left her—and Harumi—weakened and sickly.

“However, that breakdown was what allowed Princess Alaia’s wish to come true.”

Alaia's wish was to protect Koutarou and her citizens. She put her life and emotions in the sword to be with him. That was all she wanted. To Alaia, it was the perfect solution. And Kiriha saw yet another one if its benefits.

"According to the legends of Forthorthe, the treasured sword gifted by the divine has the power of immortality. Most likely, as long the sword is not sealed, the user will be reincarnated and be brought to the sword. If you consider that immortality, everything makes sense."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you get it? As long as you have that sword, Princess Alaia will be reincarnated and come to your side."

"You don't mean...!"

Hearing Kiriha's words, a thought flashed through Koutarou's mind. If the sword's guardian died, they would be reborn by the side of the sword. That's why the sword's guardian, Alaia, was reincarnated as Harumi under Signaltin's guidance. It was so that she could stand with Koutarou whenever he wielded the sword.

"In point, yes. Even if you were separated by endless time and immeasurable distance..."

Yet it wasn't something that Alaia had intentionally strived to do. She had only awakened the sword and entrusted it to Koutarou because she treasured both him and the citizens of Forthorthe. It was her pure, earnest desires that brought forth a miracle. One that fulfilled her heart's deepest desire—living by Koutarou's side as a normal girl despite the obstacles of time and distance.

"'These feelings will always be with you,' huh?" said Theia with a wry grin. "She parted with everything, giving up her memories and even forsaking her body so her feelings could chase after Koutarou. No wonder her acting was so good, jeez..."

As it turned out, there was a good reason that Harumi was always so good at playing the part of Alaia. It was also why she could only act with Koutarou. In truth, it wasn't acting at all.

"That said, I have no intentions of surrendering him to you, Harumi..."

If Theia's treasured sword Saguratin had the same function and she was in the same position as Alaia, Theia would most likely do the same thing. She would pour just as much of her life force into it. So while Theia sympathized with Harumi, she wasn't going to hold back. Those feelings were shared by all of the girls gathered in the medical office.

"Aaaaaaaahh!" Clan suddenly shrieked.

It shattered the quiet, tranquil atmosphere in the room and startled everyone thoroughly. Yurika was so surprised she even fell out of her chair.

"So that's how it was, Veltlion!"

Clan grabbed Koutarou in a panic and shouted at him. It was the opposite of what had happened just before. Granted, being the smaller of the two meant her shaking him was far less forceful, but her panicked state was even worse than Koutarou's had been.

"C-Calm down! What are you talking about?"

"If the original bearer of the sword was Alaia, then the original legend wasn't about Layous the Blue Knight, but Alaia the Sword Princess! No wonder we couldn't find him no matter how much we searched! The Blue Knight never existed to begin with!"

Clan was in such a panic because she had realized the truth behind the legend of the Blue Knight. After desperately searching for him for fear that she may have ended up killing him, this was a big deal for her.

"Wait a minute, Clan. That doesn't make sense," interjected Theia.

However, Clan's claim was full of holes. Theia, who knew the legend better than anyone, had no trouble spotting them.

"You said so yourself that you two were indispensable in the legend of the Blue Knight. What of Maxfern's virus?" Theia continued.

"That's..."

Clan was unable to answer. She'd exclaimed her theory in her excitement and hadn't yet given it that kind of thorough consideration. But in her stead, Kiriha was happy to answer.

"If she hadn't met with Koutarou, Princess Alaia might have undone the seal on Signaltin earlier. Surviving somehow, it most likely would have been right after the cliff where she would have met Koutarou. Then Maxfern wouldn't have had a reason to use the virus."

In a scenario where Alaia and her party hadn't met Koutarou, they would have been fundamentally lacking in combat potential. That would have led Alaia to awaken the sword much sooner, but without that knowledge, Maxfern wouldn't have needed to resort to his virus. He'd only used it to try and corner her.

"Alternatively, he did unleash it and awakening Signaltin might have been necessary in order to survive the virus."

"...So in the end, we were just dancing around the legend when we didn't need to."

Even if Koutarou had done nothing, Alaia would have come out victorious through her own strength. However, knowing of the legend of the Blue Knight, Koutarou and Clan had felt compelled to make it a reality. It felt like some cruel joke now, and Koutarou couldn't keep a bitter smile from forming on his lips.

"No, we can't be sure about that, Koutarou."

"Huh?"

"At the very least, without you, there must have been some major tragedy other than the assassination attempt when you were seriously injured. A tragedy serious enough for the wise and disciplined Alaia to decide to undo the seal."

Kiriha didn't see it the same way Koutarou did. She didn't believe what he and Clan had done had been pointless. Alaia's wish to protect the citizens of Forthorthe and her desire to protect the seriously injured Koutarou had served as the trigger that caused her to undo the seal on Signaltin. In the reality where Koutarou and Clan weren't there, there had to have been

some other crisis that caused her make that decision. And it could be said that by being there, they had prevented it.

“Besides, Layous-sama, even if Alaia-sama had won against Maxfern on her own, there’s no guarantee that Forthorthe would be as prosperous as it is now. Without you and Clan-san, our strategies and tactics would be far less sophisticated. Casualties in warfare would most likely be much higher as a result, both then and now. Moreover, Signaltin would have remained in the nation.”

Elfaria was of the same opinion as Kiriha. Increased casualties could have been devastating to Forthorthe’s history. For example, without some of the key players in the restoration of Forthorthe after the chaos settled down, its recuperation from the war would have been very different. And that was just the beginning. Generations of people would vanish from history if their ancestors had been wiped out before they were ever born. On top of that, Signaltin would have only complicated things further. If the sword of royalty, the treasured sword gifted by the divine, Signaltin, had remained in Forthorthe, there would have been many vying for it and the control of the nation. With a past that unstable, there was no guarantee that Forthorthe would have been as prosperous as it was now. In fact, Elfaria believed Forthorthe wouldn’t have even made it to the present day under such circumstances.

“It’s just as Her Majesty Elfaria says,” affirmed Kiriha. “There’s no need for you to think of what you did as unnecessary.”

And although she stopped there, Kiriha had much more in depth conjecture on the matter.

The truth is that Koutarou’s actions weren’t meaningless. After all, the legend of the Sword Princess doesn’t exist in this world. Only the legend of the Blue Knight. In other words, this isn’t the original world so to speak. But it’s not some parallel world that existed from the start either. History has already been altered through countless, repeated time slips. In those infinitely created parallel worlds, Koutarou has probably struggled with the same things over and over, coming to a similar resolution each time—the result of that being history stabilizing in this form. All quite possibly because of Koutarou’s will...

But Kiriha knew that her thoughts were far too complex to be appropriate for the current conversation, so she chose to stay silent.

“Sounds like you guys want me to stay as a hero no matter what,” sighed Koutarou.

“You are a hero, Satomi Koutarou. On your way back from Forthorthe in the past, you saved me and Elfaria-dono. That is without a doubt your own accomplishment. Princess Alaia had nothing to do with it,” said Kiriha.

“You’ve saved me several times over in the present. That alone is enough to call you a hero,” said Theia.

“Me too! Me too!” shouted Sanae.

“And regardless, you’re currently saving Forthorthe now, Master,” said Ruth.

“You’ve also saved me and Maki-chan,” added Yurika.

“This body of mine was only made possible because you brought everyone together, Satomi-san,” said Nana.

“So why don’t you give in already, Satomi-kun? I’ve been saved ever since Uncle came to me,” said Shizuka.

“Thinking about it, I’m the only one you haven’t saved. Though you have defeated me...” added Clan with a frown.

“What are you getting all pouty for? You’re the hero’s sidekick.”

“If you’re aware of that, then why not act like it?”

Koutarou had been on the verge of falling into depression over the meaningless of what he’d done in the past, but the people closest to him had pulled him back.

At the very least, I’m their hero... In that case, I’ll have to protect them no matter what!

And that only strengthened Koutarou’s resolve further. He would win this battle and safely return these girls to their original lives. That clear sense of purpose kindled an optimistic hope within him.

“Let’s get back on topic. I get that Sakuraba-senpai might be Her Majesty Alaia, but what I want to know now is how can we get her better.”

That of course included Harumi, who was still recovering in the ICU. There was no way Koutarou was going to let her lose her life over this battle.

“How about we let Harumi hold on to Signaltin? Based on what Clan said before, it sounds like that should resolve the problem.”

If Signaltin was originally Alaia’s—was originally Harumi’s—then letting her hold on to it should activate the recovery magic. It was a very simple, Theia-like idea. However, their magic expert, Nana, shook her head at the suggestion.

“Signaltin was revived as Satomi-san’s sword, so the recovery magic is probably linked to him. Just letting Sakuraba-san hold on to it probably won’t help.”

“Signaltin was unable to cut down Veltlion after all, so that’s very likely,” said Clan.

She was in agreement with Nana. While Signaltin was draining Harumi’s life to function, its owner now was Koutarou. The problem was it having been awakened like that.

“If Sakuraba-san always stays by Satomi-san’s side and continually uses Signaltin’s recovery magic, then she might get better, but—”

“No. I can’t ask Sakuraba-senpai to live like that.”

With the crest on her forehead, Harumi was able to use Signaltin’s mana, but she could only do it when Koutarou and Signaltin were near. Nana’s plan would mean Harumi having to live by Koutarou’s side out of necessity, and Koutarou didn’t want Harumi to be dependent on him like that.

“In that case, I guess the only thing we can do is wait for Sakuraba-san to wake up and annul the contract with Signaltin. Although, that would mean Signaltin would become a normal sword,” Nana explained.

“Even if that’s the case, Sakuraba-senpai’s health is more important. Let’s go with that.”

In terms of combat potential, losing Signaltin was a painful blow. It would mean losing both the sword and Harumi’s magic. But even so, it was a small price to pay for Harumi’s well-being. If they continued fighting like this, there was a chance that Harumi would never wake up... or worse. And with that being the alternative, Koutarou gladly agreed to have Harumi annul the contract with Signaltin as Nana suggested.

Miscalculation

Monday, December 6th

While the group decided it would be best for Harumi to annul the contract with Signaltin, Harumi herself had yet to even open her eyes. With no other choice, Koutarou and the others reluctantly let her be for the time being and tried to make progress on their original objective: going into space after DKI.

“Hey, Sanae-chan,” Yurika said with a degree of curiosity.

“What?”

“What kind of a place is a space station?”

“Hmm... What kind of a place *is* it?” Sanae rubbed her chin, turning to Koutarou.

“Don’t look at me,” he said, shaking his head.

With the Reborn Forthorthian Army gaining control of the airspace around the spaceport and the military satellites in orbit, Koutarou and the others were safely able to enter space. Now they were waiting at the local space station for Theia’s personal battleship, Blue Knight, to arrive before proceeding further.

“It’s times like this you should turn to Kiriha,” he offered.

“To put it simply,” Kiriha interjected when she heard her name, “it’s like a spaceship that doesn’t move. In this station’s case, it’s like a very large spaceship being used as a port.”

“A port? Even though there’s a spaceport down below?” Yurika asked.

“Yes. There are still plenty of ships that can’t descend to the spaceport. In fact, you could think of this space station and the spaceport below as a single port.”

“Oh, I kinda get it!” Sanae chimed in. “It’s like a meeting place!”

“That’s right,” replied Kiriha.

Forthorthian space stations were like spaceports, just in space instead of grounded on a particular planet. They were something like a meeting place or a transfer gate between ships going to and from the surface, and spaceships coming and going from other planets. As far as design was concerned, most ships had to sacrifice size and transport capacity for the ability to function in the atmosphere and travel down to the surface. So larger transport and passenger ships that couldn’t make that tradeoff had to unload cargo and drop off passengers at the station, where they would then be able to take smaller ships to the planet below. Things were more efficient that way, and in that sense, the station was like a door separating space and the surface.

“Ruth, when is Blue Knight arriving?” Theia asked.

“I just confirmed the ETA, and it’s currently four hours away.”

Being a massive vessel over a kilometer long, Theia’s Blue Knight wasn’t a very stealthy ship. That’s why Koutarou and the others had left it behind when descending to Alaia. Specifically, they’d hidden it in the ring surrounding Alaia. Not unlike the rings of Saturn, Alaia’s consisted of countless asteroids, making things within it hard to detect among all the debris. And it was an effective tactic. Despite Blue Knight’s size, it had gone undiscovered by the Imperial Army the entire time they were on Alaia. Currently, it was meeting up with an allied fleet outside of the ring, and from there it would head to the station where Koutarou and the others were waiting.

“So we can take it easy until then, right?” Yurika asked.

“Don’t go too far though. While this area is under our control, it’s still dangerous. And even if that weren’t the case, you’re still a danger to yourself,” Koutarou warned.

“What are you saying?!”

“You’d definitely get lost in a place this big.”

“Ugh...”

“Regardless of what you’re doing, make sure you stay with Aika-san or Landlord-san.”

To accommodate spaceships the size of Blue Knight, the station itself was extremely large. It was over ten kilometers from edge to edge, making it one of the largest structures in Forthorthe. It was quite reasonable for Koutarou to worry about Yurika getting lost. And since there was no way to guarantee that the entire station was safe, their best bet was waiting out the remaining four hours somewhere they knew was secure.

To that end, Koutarou and the others were all currently in their hotel room aboard the space station. Since it functioned very similarly to an airport on Earth and people were constantly waiting for connecting flights, the station included facilities like hotels where passengers could get some rest in the meantime. Koutarou and company had gotten a room at one such establishment, but since they had more than ten people in their party, they had to use one of the larger rooms there. And yet despite how big the room was, they were all gathered around the sofa and table. Perhaps it was habit from living in room 106, but it just didn’t feel right to sit far apart from each other.

“Room service,” an unfamiliar voice called from the other side of the door.

“Coming!” Shizuka called back as she ran to answer it.

As leaving the room could be dangerous—including the risk of certain parties getting lost—the group had decided to hang out in the room. Instead of going out, they just had room service deliver whatever they needed.

“Oh? Isn’t this alcohol? I’m sorry, but we didn’t order this.”

“I’m terribly sorry. I’ll reconfirm the order and come right back.”

“Thank you.”

After dealing with the mistaken room service waiter with a polite smile, Shizuka quickly went back over to the others, but her smile was gone. She now had a serious look on her face.

“Kiriha-san, could that be what you were talking about a moment ago?”

“Indeed. Prepare yourselves, everyone. It’s very likely that an attack is imminent.”

They had less than two hours now before Blue Knight was scheduled to arrive. It seemed foolish to assume that room service they hadn’t ordered was just a coincidental mistake with that kind of timing. They wanted to be prepared for anything, especially if it might be an attack, so Koutarou and the others readied their weapons and waited.

“It’s quiet. Sanae, can you tell what’s going on?” Koutarou asked after a few moments of silence.

“Hmm, I can sense people moving, but there doesn’t seem to be anyone thinking bad thoughts.”

“We can’t sense anything either, ho!”

“But if DKI is supplying the military with equipment, we won’t be able to tell until they get close, ho!”

One minute, two minutes... Time slowly passed, but the enemy wasn’t attacking. Three minutes, four minutes... The clock continued to tick, but all was silent in the hotel.

“Were we mistaken?” Yurika asked.

Unable to stand the tension, Yurika was all too eager to jump to a conclusion. She was trying to relieve her anxiety by telling herself that an attack wasn’t really coming. Unlike Yurika, however, Maki was completely calm.

“Yurika, it’s standard procedure to launch an ambush when the enemy has their guard lowered. If they’re coming, it’ll be soon.”

“Please don’t say something that scary, Maki-chan.”

Scary or not, Maki was right. It all started ten minutes after the room service came.

Booooom!

The entire room suddenly shook with the sound of a loud explosion. It was enough to make the girls scream, but thanks to their experience and preparedness, they quickly recovered and took action. Danger was just around the corner.

“Ruth, what’s the situation?!”

Theia gripped the large rifle she’d prepare beforehand as she approached the door. The explosion was loud enough that it sounded like it had come from nearby.

“The surveillance camera in the VIP room has blacked out! The hidden camera in the hallway has spotted a suspicious group trying to break into the VIP room!”

Just as Theia made it to the door, Ruth had already located where the explosion had occurred. She sent a hologram of the camera feed to Theia’s bracelet. Black and white smoke was pouring from the hotel’s heavily guarded VIP room into the hallway. A dozen or so men wearing full-body suits made from a smooth material were entering the room one after another. Yet strangely enough, as they moved in, the people inside the room disappeared.

“No reaction on the optical sensor, ho!”

“No reaction on the spiritual energy sensor either, ho!”

“There are slight traces of mana. Yurika-chan, Maki-san, please investigate that more thoroughly!” Nana called to the other magical girls.

This level of technology was clearly above that of the Imperial Army. It was either DKI or, more likely, a military unit receiving support from them.

“A small force with equipment made by DKI. Magic is being used, but Darkness Rainbow is not present. In this situation, escape route C3 is most appropriate.”

After examining the information at hand, Kiriha quickly settled on a plan. She had actually anticipated all of this beforehand, which is why illusions that could move independently had been left in the VIP room while Koutarou and the others were actually all in a different room. They'd used illusion magic to alter their appearances, disguising themselves as a group of senior citizens on a leisurely vacation. And that was what the room service waiter had seen from the door earlier.

"Kiriha-san, wouldn't it be better to just stay here?"

Although Kiriha's suggestion was to escape, Koutarou objected. The enemy had attacked the VIP room, meaning that they still didn't know where Koutarou and the others really were. Right now, it seemed to him like a better idea to stay put than to risk getting attacked while making a move.

"I'm suspicious that the room service waiter came when he did. They must have picked out specific rooms they found suspicious, which is why the waiter came by here too. And now that they know we aren't in the VIP room, they'll likely hit the other rooms to be sure. At this rate, we'll be cornered!"

If the room service waiter was an enemy scout, they must have managed to narrow down Koutarou and the other's possible location to a finite area. As the hotel had several dozen large rooms for big parties, they probably hadn't gone door to door to check every single one.

"But Kiriha, if the explosion in the VIP room was to flush us out, won't they be expecting us?"

Theia, who was observing the situation outside the door, pointed out a problem with Kiriha's plan. Kiriha was a strategic genius, but Theia had wits to match hers when it came to small-scale battles.

"That's why I picked escape route C3."

As Kiriha answered, she sent detailed information on the route to Theia's bracelet. Glancing over it, Theia smiled wryly.

"...Seems I was preaching to the choir. Then follow me, men! The enemy will soon be upon us!"

Now thinking it was their best option, Theia was on board with Kiriha's escape plan and quickly took action.

“You’re in the back, idiot!” Koutarou called to the all-too-eager Theia.

“Who are you calling an idiot, huh?!” she roared back.

“The idiot that needs to protect Elle and Sakuraba-senpai!”

“You could have just said that from the start, jeez...”

Normally Koutarou and the others wouldn’t be so worked up in a situation like this, but right now they had also had to worry about Elfaria, who couldn’t fight, and Harumi, who was still unconscious. With two major liabilities, everyone was feeling a little extra on edge.

As Theia had pointed out, the explosion in the VIP room was most likely to flush their group out. That would in turn mean that the enemy force had plenty of troops patrolling the hotel, and the entrance would be heavily guarded. Anticipating that much, Kiriha’s escape plan involved them getting to the roof. From the floor they were on, it would be faster to go up than down. Also, the higher up they went, the less likely they were to run into enemy troops since they were probably concentrated near the entrance of the building. But most of all, avoiding people and conflict would mean avoiding getting innocent hotel guests involved. Most of them were quickly heading downstairs to evacuate, so shortly after leaving the room and heading up, Koutarou and the others didn’t see any other guests around.

“What do we do once we get to the roof, Kiriha-san?” Koutarou asked as he swung Saguratin. When he did, the blade of spiritual energy it released sent the two Imperial Army soldiers down the hallway flying.

“Because we need to carry Harumi, escaping in a vehicle is preferable. Since Clan-dono’s Cradle is on standby above, we’ll take that,” explained Kiriha.

“Yeah, we can’t run around the station pushing this,” added Sanae.

With Forthorthe’s technology, it would be possible for them to jump from the roof, but running around the station with the stretcher carrying both Harumi and Signaltin was a bit of an issue. Thanks to the gravity controls, the stretcher floated in the air and moved on its own as long as someone was guiding it. In fact, it was far faster than Yurika doing her best attempt at running. The real problem was its size. It stood out a lot, and it would be difficult to handle in narrow alleyways as they escaped. Avoiding that situation altogether certainly seemed like the best option.

Pew!

“You really do think of everything, Kiriha!”

Even as she twisted her head to dodge a bullet, Sanae was admiring Kiriha. Not only had she sensed the danger of the VIP room, but she had thought out ways to escape ahead of time. Sanae didn’t like thinking in the first place, so she was especially grateful to have Kiriha with them right now.

“Unlike you, it’s the only thing I’m good at. But now, it’s my turn to rely on your powers.”

“What do you mean?”

“They know we’ll try to escape in a vehicle. They should be able to figure out at least that much just from Elfaria being with us.”

If it wasn’t for Harumi, Kiriha might have tried to outwit the enemy by escaping on foot. But since moving Harumi that way would be too problematic, she had no choice but to try and make it to the Cradle from the roof.

“So there’s a lot of soldiers, huh?”

Clang! Bang!

“Don’t worry, Kiriha,” Theia announced. “I’m good at forcing our way through.”

“Heh, I’m expecting a lot from you.”

Beneath her calm exterior, Kiriha had felt a little anxious about her escape plan. But after seeing Theia’s smiling face through the puff of smoke from her rifle, she started to feel like everything would work out just fine.

In order to get to the roof, the group would need to use either the elevator, the normal stairs, or the emergency stairs. Naturally, the elevator was out of the question. That meant they had to take one of the staircases, but their design made them optimal for ambushes. It was an incredibly dangerous proposition.

“According to Sanae-chan, there’s one on the other side of the wall here, and one more over here.”

However, Koutarou and the others thankfully had Sanae with them. They had her leave her body to peek through the walls to check the other side for ambushes so they could avoid them altogether. That's what they were doing right now. Sanae-chan was scouting out the enemy positions and conveying the information to Sanae-san, who then relayed it to the group.

"It's show time for the genius magical girl," Theia said with a smirk.

Yurika half groaned, half whined. She knew what she was being asked to do. Once Sanae had pinpointed the enemy, it was Yurika's turn to step in. And each time she did, tears welled in her eyes.

"P-Paralyzing Mist..."

"Don't cry now," said Koutarou.

"But... But..."

Within a confined space like a building, attacks that took a continuous toll on their victims like poison or acid were incredibly powerful. They also had the added advantage of being effective over an area, meaning she didn't have to know the enemy's exact location to target them. But most importantly, they were the specialty of the magical girl of love and courage, Rainbow Yurika. And just like that, two more soldiers were knocked out by Yurika's poison gas. It was a splendid maneuver. They managed safe passage with zero casualties, but Yurika still couldn't be happy about it.

"This is wrong. This is so completely wrong."

"But it's really helping us out," Koutarou offered.

"Aaauuuuugh..."

"But it looks like this is as far as we can rely on Yurika," Theia commented.

With Yurika eliminating the enemy, Sanae-chan came back through the wall.

"Theia's right. There's a bunch of soldiers waiting for us in the hall up ahead. They're wearing things that look like gas masks, so Yurika's signature attack probably won't work again."

While scouting ahead, Sanae-chan had spotted twenty soldiers waiting for them just before the emergency stairs leading to the roof. They were far more heavily armed than the ones they'd come across so far.

"Sanae, what kind of weapons and equipment do they have?"

"Um, a lot of strange weapons like big guns on tripods and metal balls floating in the air. And they're wearing armor that looks hard to move around in."

"As I suspected..."

Kiriha's expression grew stern. She'd anticipated heavily armed forces had been positioned to keep them from getting outside, but this was more serious than what she'd expected.

"Gas masks and heavy armor implies they know about our abilities. They're fully countering Yurika's specialty."

"Kiriha-san, it's not my specialty!"

A gas mask to protect against the poison gas, and full armor to protect against the acid. It was pretty clear they'd taken specific precautions against Koutarou and the others. If they went in thinking it would go the same as it usually did, they'd likely pay for it dearly.

"Hey, Kiriha-san, if Uncle and I just open up a hole in the wall, we wouldn't have to fight, would we?"

It was foolish to fight an opponent that clearly had the upper hand, so Shizuka's idea was to use Alunaya's power to bust through the hotel wall and make it to the Cradle from there. Kiriha, however, shook her head at the idea.

"If we do that, the enemy would learn our exact location, and they might even follow us."

Koutarou and the others were relatively safe because they were still within the Reborn Forthorthian Army's sphere of influence, meaning there was a finite limit to the Imperial Army forces in the area. And as long as they didn't know precisely where Koutarou and the others were, it would be impossible to focus their troops in a targeted attack. They needed to keep a low profile, and blowing a hole in the outer wall of the hotel would just announce their location and dramatically increase the odds of being attacked directly.

"Rats. I guess we really will just have to defeat them and get to the roof as quickly as possible..." Shizuka sighed.

While she was strong, Shizuka was still a normal girl at heart. She couldn't help but shying away from this kind of fighting. Conversely, however, Theia was chomping at the bit.

"There's no need to worry. Like I said before, I'm good at forcing my way through! Leave it to me! Besides, Koutarou is here too!"

"We'll manage somehow, so don't worry, Landlord-san."

“Thanks, guys.”

Shizuka wasn’t the only one who was feeling uneasy. Since most of the girls had no military training, Theia and Koutarou’s leadership was a much needed bolster to their morale. It gave them all the courage to step into the clutches of the enemy without fear in their hearts.

What they needed to be most wary of as they entered combat in the hallway was soldiers calling for reinforcements or otherwise accidentally alerting other groups of soldiers that there was a fight going on. Accordingly, the first thing they did was jam communications and cloak themselves.

“Here we go, Pardomshiha!” Clan rallied.

“Yes! Commencing jamming on all bands of gravitational wave communication!”

Ruth was broadcasting a jamming signal using the communication wave that Clan had analyzed beforehand as reference. With that, communications for the forces in question were shut down, and other forces would get dummy transmissions. While they would eventually notice, it was more than enough to buy some time.

“Maki-chan, let’s do our part too!”

“I’ll follow your lead, so you start!”

“Sanctuary! Modifier: Effective Area, Large!”

With the ward raised by the magical girls, sounds, and vibrations, as well heat and electromagnetic waves wouldn’t leak to the outside. Now all the Imperial Army soldiers could do was try and defeat Koutarou and the others with their own power.

“Theia, we’re going in!” Koutarou called.

“Leave support to me! You just focus on what’s in front of you!”

With Elfaria and Harumi at the back, they couldn’t let the Imperial Army get any closer. To that end, Koutarou, who had the best defenses, would close in on the enemy and keep them from advancing. The plan was for the other girls to defeat one soldier each as he held them back.

“Alert message: The enemy forces are showing signs of attacking. Deploying GoL’s active distortion field,” the AI in his armor warned.

“I’m counting on you. You’re all I’ve got for defense this time.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

With Harumi out of commission, Koutarou was only using Saguratin. Thanks to Sanae’s influence, it was unrivalled in strength against spirits, not to mention the flesh and bone of humans. Even though he was one sword down, it was by no means inferior to Signaltin. With his armor, including additional defensive support from GoL, Koutarou was still well equipped for combat.

“You should be relying on me, not your armor!” Theia shouted.

“Me too, me too!” Sanae chirped.

“All right, let’s do this!” Shizuka rallied after them.

The three girls followed Koutarou. They would be responsible for dealing with the enemy. Or, more specifically, protecting Koutarou as he took the lead. The first to fire was, as expected, trigger-happy Theia.

“Don’t think you can defeat me just because I’m not wearing my dress!”

Theia wasn’t currently wearing her combat dress. Because it increased her mobility and firepower, it wasn’t suited for use in the narrow confines of the hotel. Even the comparably lightweight Command Green would get in the way of the other girls. Instead, she was relying exclusively on her gun. She was using a light and compact assault rifle chosen for its handling, and she would be making up for its lack of accuracy with pure skill.

Ratatat! Ratatat!

Theia fired in bursts of three, specifically aiming for the hotel light fixtures. Defenseless and immobile as they were, they didn’t stand a chance against Theia’s sharpshooting.

“Wahahaha, you can’t use night vision when you’re wearing those gas masks!”

“O-Oh no! Get the lights!”

With all of the lights destroyed, the hall went dark. The soldiers protecting the emergency stairs to the roof were confounded, but it had no effect on Koutarou and the others thanks to Sanae, who was transmitting her spirit sight to them.

“Super Sanae-chaaan! Paranormal Activity!”

While the soldiers were scrambling in the sudden darkness, Sanae launched her attack. The vast amounts of spiritual energy overflowing from her body assaulted the barrier generator set up behind the soldiers. It began rattling and shaking enough that screws and bolts began falling off of it on their own. If the soldiers had seen it, they might have panicked at the eerie sight.

“Landlord-san!”

“Yeah!”

As the Imperial Army soldiers were carrying lights, the hallway was soon lit up again. But by that time, Koutarou had already made it halfway to them. Following close behind him was Shizuka.

“Fire! Open fire! Don’t let them get closer!” the enemy captain ordered sharply.

Pew! Pew, pew, pew!

The dozen or so soldiers hurriedly aimed their laser rifles, and shot after shot rained down on Koutarou and the others. After closing in on them, Koutarou would normally swiftly defeat the soldiers before him, but not this time.

“Alert message: Heavy load on the distortion field. The strategy algorithm recommends an immediate retreat.”

“That won’t do. Just try to hang—”

Ratatatatatatata!

That was when a heavy machine gun locked on to Koutarou and unloaded a whole new hail of fire on him. If it had just been the machine gun, dodging wouldn’t have been that hard. However, while simultaneously trying to avoid the lasers, he couldn’t afford to concentrate on just the bullets.

“Critical alert: The distortion field will collapse in three seconds.”

“It’s that bad?!”

“Recommend activating emergency protocol. An immediate withdrawal from the combat area is required.”

“Tch!”

The hail of bullets pushed the barrier created by Koutarou’s armor to its absolute limits. The whole thing was about to collapse. Even for a heavy machine gun, it was unthinkable.

Now you’ve done it, Elexis!

When faced with a heavy load of lasers, it was impossible to dodge all of them. Some of them were inevitably going to hit. That’s why slipping in a heavy machine gun even when Koutarou used his spirit sight—or rather, because he was using his spirit sight—left him unable to dodge the bullets. It was a method of attack that had been devised knowing Koutarou’s equipment, abilities, and his way of thinking.

To top it all off, the ammunition for the machine gun in question had been enchanted. When showered with overly powerful bullets, the barrier created by Koutarou’s armor couldn’t protect against them all, despite being reinforced by GoL. First the gas masks and armor, and now this. Everything about the way these soldiers attacked and moved had been specifically planned to handle Koutarou and his allies. There was no way that DKI wasn’t involved.

And not having Sakuraba-senpai here is making this harder than I thought it would be!

In an indoor battle against humans, Saguratin was a worthy match for Signaltin, but at a certain point, it wasn’t just about the sword. The magic of Signaltin was that it was a weapon used by two people.

Since both Koutarou and Harumi controlled Signaltin, when he wasn’t using it to attack, she could cast spells with its reserve strength. It was like it was operating at maximum efficiency at all times. In that sense, it was probably even stronger than when Alaia had wielded it herself, because she likely wouldn’t have been able to control it as deftly as two people could at once.

If Harumi had been there with Signaltin, the heavy machine gun probably wouldn’t have been any real threat. She could have used defensive spells to

protect against it, used illusion magic to throw off its aim, or even used an offensive spell to put it out of commission. Koutarou wasn't just down a sword. He was down a magician. That was how big of a difference not having Signaltin made.

Ting, ting, ting, ting, ting!

Koutarou's barrier finally failed, and bullets began pounding his armor. Round after round dented the suit, which began to crack in places. Even with GoL, considering the force behind the bullets, it was only a matter of time before the armor completely buckled.

"Activate emergency protocol!"

"Limiter released. Generator output at 120 percent. Center of gravity has been changed. Energy distribution has been altered. Automatic evasion priority has been changed. Forced heat exhaust system activated."

"Please let this be enough!"

Pushing his armor to reckless limits, Koutarou's movements became extremely fast. With that, he was able to escape the spray of bullets from the heavy machine gun, but he wasn't out of the woods yet. He still had over a dozen laser rifles aimed at him.

Pew! Pew, pew, pew!

"Something like this!"

"Driving devices one and two on upper left arm, and driving device two on lumbar vertebrae damaged. Circuits have been bypassed. Reactivation in process."

Koutarou was right in front of the Imperial Army soldiers now. If he charged in, the risk of friendly fire might make it harder for them to attack, but based on the damage report from his armor's AI, it was probably too much to hope for.

Ratatatatatatata!

Although he'd shaken off a round of fire from the machine gun, it was already firing again. If the bullets caught up to him this time, there would be

nothing he could do but retreat. Unfortunately, with his movements slowed by his now damaged armor, the volley of bullets began slamming into GoL.

“Left arm of GoL has ceased functioning. Seizing energy supply. Redirecting... Close combat attack power has dropped by 20 percent.”

“Even that wasn’t enough?!”

Not even channeling all of the energy normally used for offense into defense was enough to block the enchanted bullets from the machine gun. Several parts of GoL had already been destroyed, and it was rapidly losing power.

“Agh...”

A bullet pierced his damaged blue armor and injured Koutarou’s left arm. It wasn’t all that serious, but it was clear it wouldn’t be the last hit he was going to take. The pain had only distracted him for a split second, but a new volley of bullets was now closing in on him.

“Don’t... worry...”

Suddenly, a pure white light appeared before Koutarou. It transformed into a glowing shield and blocked the bullets from reaching him.

“Sakuraba-senpai?!”

Koutarou knew immediately where that light had come from. It was Signaltin and Harumi on the stretcher in the back. They were easily powerful enough to reach him from this distance. There was no mistaking that the power that had protected Koutarou since even before he ever held Signaltin was protecting him even now.

Ratatatatatatata!

However, it was much weaker than normal. As if it represented the weakened Harumi, the white light was faint. Because of that, the shield only held out against the bullets for a few seconds.

“Everyone, take care of Koutarou!” Shizuka shouted.

However, those precious few seconds the shield had bought changed Koutarou’s fate. Shizuka used that time to transform into her half-dragon, half-human form, and she now leaped to his defense.

Pwooooosh!

She opened her mouth wide and spewed flames across the hall. She was prioritizing area over power with this particular attack, so it didn't do much harm to the armored soldiers. But even so, it was only natural to flinch when doused in fire, and the flames temporarily obscured the soldiers' vision. It was enough that their attacks stopped for the moment.

"Intelligent Illusion!"

"Greater Force Field!"

The magicians used that opening to make their moves. Maki cast an illusionary spell that created several fake Koutarous, while Yurika cast a spell to protect him.

"Sanae-chan God Arrow!"

Sanae joined in after them. With a rarely seen serious expression on her face, she fired an arrow made of spiritual energy. Normally it would split into several arrows to attack multiple enemies, but this time it remained intact and headed for a single target. It was going after the heavy machine gun that was hard targeting Koutarou.

"You dare to harm my knight?!"

"I won't let you kill Master!"

"What a troublesome knight you are!"

Theia, Ruth, and Clan then joined in to attack the other soldiers. With the enemy's large barrier generator destroyed, the girls took their targets out one after another.

"Koutarou, fall back now, ho!"

"Big brother, we want you to protect Ane-san and Elle-chama in our stead, ho!"

"Y-Yeah, thanks..."

Things didn't seem so bad now. Because the troops had been focused on Koutarou, the girls saw an opening and took advantage of it. Koutarou had accomplished his original goal. The only real miscalculation was that he had

taken too much damage in the process. And with that, Koutarou retreated and left the rest to the girls and the haniwas. He knew that continuing to fight with the heavy damage he'd taken to GoL and his armor would only put his allies at risk.

"I'm glad you're okay, Koutarou."

"Layous-sama, are you hurt anywhere?"

Kiriha and Elfaria welcomed Koutarou back. They were both visibly concerned. Kiriha even had tears in her eyes. It was obvious he'd given them quite a scare, and the same was likely true for the other girls.

"I'm fine. This is nothing. If anything, the problem is that I just got in the way."

Koutarou showed off his injured left arm with a wry smile. It wasn't a serious injury. Koutarou was honestly more shocked at his performance during the fight. He'd thought he'd be able to handle it without Harumi, but reality was harsh, and he'd learned a painful lesson. In the end, Harumi had still even had to use her power to save him. Because of that, Koutarou was unable to take his eyes off the stretcher where Harumi was still sleeping.

"I think that problem lies with all of us. None of us imagined what it would really take to close the hole left by Sakuraba-san," offered Nana, who was with the others on the rear lines.

The way Nana saw it, everyone had failed in a way. The girls were all still holding Koutarou to his usual performance in combat, so they'd held off on coming to his aid. With Harumi unable to fight, they knew they needed to change their priorities, but just like Koutarou, they had only thought of it as being one ally down. No one had really considered how losing Harumi would affect the dynamics of the way Koutarou fought. Their perfect teamwork had been disrupted.

"Moreover, the Imperial Army was focusing explicitly on you. You may not have noticed in the heat of the moment," Kiriha added.

Elfaria, Nana, and Kiriha had had a full view of the battle from where they were waiting in the back. They of course saw the mistake in underestimating the loss of Harumi, but they also realized partway through the fight that the soldiers were outright ignoring Theia, Shizuka, and Sanae. Both factors were what had driven Koutarou into such a dangerous position.

“They were focusing fire on me?”

“Yes. Vandarion considers you more of a nuisance than you may realize. He probably thinks the tables will turn for him if he kills you.”

Kiriha believed the lasers and heavy machine gun were measures taken against Koutarou specifically. As lasers were weaponized light, they connected with their target almost instantaneously. By grouping several of them together, it would be easy enough to pin Koutarou down. That way, even if he dodged the lasers, the heavy machine gun would be able to finish him off as the bullets caught up. Combined with countermeasures against Yurika, it was a simple, yet effective and thoughtful plan. Even more so without Harumi on their side. It was really very poor timing for Koutarou and the others.

“That said, the plan wasn’t formulated to do anything other than that. If it didn’t work out of the gate, they’d just be normal troops with slightly better equipment, which would mean...”

“Kiriha, Koutarou! We’ve cleaned up over here! Let’s get to the roof before more show up!”

“...that would happen.”

By the time Koutarou had talked through what had happened with Kiriha and the others on the rear lines, the fight was over. While the soldiers had been given the equipment they needed to kill Koutarou, they didn’t have the power to defeat his allies—especially not with the girls angry that Koutarou had been wounded. The Imperial Army soldiers never stood a chance.

Conference

Tuesday, December 7th

Koutarou stood stock-still staring at his damaged armor. It was currently affixed to a maintenance workbench with several automated machines working to repair the compromised parts. At the current rate, it would be fixed within a few hours.

“...In the end, the problem is that I don’t have any strength of my own...”

Koutarou and the others had safely been able to escape from the hotel and move over to the Cradle, which then left the space station and rendezvoused with Blue Knight on its way back. Their escape had gone almost exactly as Kiriha had planned.

“...So long as they had the right strategy, even a normal squad could take me out...”

The only miscalculation was that Koutarou was almost killed in the process. Because of his teamwork with Harumi through Signaltin, their loss made a profound difference in terms of Koutarou’s combat capabilities. They’d simply underestimated what that loss would cost them. The bandage now wrapped around Koutarou’s arm was a sign of that hefty price.

“...No matter how hard I try, I’m just a normal human...”

Koutarou was certainly strong. He’d be among the strongest even in Forthorthe. But that strength came from the support of nine other girls. He himself was just a boy with some skill in swordplay. His strength on his own was tenuous. Harumi’s absence had revealed it was like a high-rise on a fragile foundation. And that realization put even more strain on the collapsed Harumi.

“...Despite that, the Reborn Forthorthian Army is counting on my strength because of some legend. Will we really be okay like this?”

Koutarou had gained a true sense of the danger they were in courtesy of the incident at the hotel. The Reborn Forthorthian Army as it stood was greatly influenced by Koutarou’s existence, predominantly because Forthorthian citizens had started to see him as their beloved hero of legend. “Let’s support the Blue Knight’s army. If that’s the army Her Majesty Elfaria is leading, she must be in the right.” There was no doubt that was the kind of public sentiment that was earning them support.

But in truth, Koutarou wasn’t all that strong. He’d almost been killed at the hotel. It left him with a lingering question: “What would happen if I got killed?”

“...Theia and Elle say they definitely won’t let me die, but isn’t the risk is too big to ignore?”

While he hadn’t really thought about it before, killing him wouldn’t be all that hard. Even worse, Vandarion and the others had realized that the Reborn Forthorthian Army needed Koutarou, so they were actively trying to eliminate him. If Harumi was out of commission when they attacked with something like the Type One Revised, what would happen then? While he had overcome it once, would he be able to do so a second or third time? Koutarou wasn’t optimistic enough to believe he’d get that lucky.

“...Public opinion is currently in Elle’s favor, but if I died, there are sure to be citizens that would lose faith in her. My life carries too much risk with it...”

If Koutarou were to fall, public opinion would likely shift in Vandarion’s favor once again. The citizens would either believe that Koutarou wasn’t really the Blue Knight’s successor after all, or worse, that not even the Blue Knight’s successor was a match for Vandarion. And with their hopes crushed, there was no guarantee that they would continue to support Elfaria. A drop in public support would then mean a drop in the army’s morale, and it would make it harder to collect supplies and other contributions from sympathizers. While he didn’t know exactly to what extent his death might affect the army, he knew it would be foolish to trivialize it.

“...I can’t let Sakuraba-senpai fight anymore. But if I keep fighting like that, things are only going to get riskier. That said, if I don’t fight at all, the enemy will use that against us in their propaganda. Is there nothing I can do?”

With Harumi and Signaltin at his side, the chances of Koutarou dying were remarkably lower, but that wasn’t such an easy task under the current circumstances. That said, without her and Signaltin, the odds against him were much higher. Even if he just stopped taking the front line to lower the risk to himself, the Reborn Forthorthian Army would be losing the pillar of support that had gotten them this far. Vandarion’s side would surely use that to tarnish his image and ruin his reputation, claiming it was proof that Koutarou wasn’t the Blue Knight’s successor.

“...Just what should I do?”

Koutarou wasn't afraid to die. This was far beyond that. Right now, the most important thing to Koutarou was how to protect Theia, Elfaria, and the other girls. Then there was his desire to protect the wishes of everyone from two thousand years ago. His life had a much lower priority than all that.

If he was unable to protect the girls, the pain would be soul crushing. Probably even worse than what he'd felt when he lost his mother. And he couldn't disappoint the friends and allies he'd made in the distant past. For those two reasons, Koutarou was determined to protect Forthorthe and its people.

So rather than fearing for his own life, Koutarou was afraid of losing his friends and betraying the hopes of people who were dear to him in his memories. But no matter what he did now, the chances were high he'd be faced with that scenario, both because he was weak and because he couldn't find a way to overcome that weakness. His frustration at his own helplessness continued to mount as he slowly moved towards that terrible reality.

Beep, beep, beep!

"...Hm?"

The sudden beeping snapped Koutarou back to his senses. It wasn't the alarm for an emergency, so Koutarou casually approached the terminal for telephone calls in the room.

"Yes?" he answered.

"Oh, Master, I thought you might be there."

As the terminal activated, Ruth and parts of the surrounding bridge where she was were displayed as a hologram. Since she looked somewhat relieved to see him, Koutarou got the vague feeling that this wasn't about anything good.

"What's the matter, Ruth-san? Did something happen?"

"Actually, something strange was delivered for you, Master," she replied in a puzzled tone.

Ruth had received a package addressed to Koutarou, and she wasn't sure how to handle it. That was why she'd be trying to find him.

"To me? What is it?"

"Well... It would be hard to explain, so would you mind coming down?"

"Okay, I'll be right there."

Koutarou left the maintenance hangar and headed for the bridge with his head tilted in perplexity. He knew that this wasn't normal. Since their current whereabouts were kept secret, a packaged being delivered was a strange, potentially troubling development. That said, putting a bomb in a package was the most elementary level of trap conceivable, so any mail they did get received a thorough inspection before being brought aboard Blue Knight. That it had reached Ruth's hands suggested that it wasn't anything nefarious, which puzzled both her and Koutarou even more.

The package in question was a small box. It had been wrapped in a thin layer of high quality wrapping paper, complete with a ribbon on top. It looked more like a present than a package, whether judging by Earth standards or Forthorthian standards.

Just having a present addressed to Koutarou was baffling enough, but the most bizarre thing of all was the tag affixed to the box. It was addressed to Koutarou, but it was written in both the Forthorthian alphabet and in kanji.

"'To Satomi Koutarou-sama,' huh? There's definitely something up with this."

Moreover, the sender's name was nowhere to be found. The strange package only seemed to get stranger.

"At the very least, it's from someone that knows you're from Earth. It could be Vandarion, or it could be DKI... Those are the most likely culprits right now," offered Kiriha.

Considering the kanji on the tag, it stood to reason that the sender was someone who had been to Earth. And since they were now in the solar system of Forthorthe, that seemed to point a finger at either DKI or the Imperial Army.

“Let’s open it up.” Koutarou casually put his hand on the box. “Considering the method, it’s probably from *him*, and I’d bet it really is a present.”

Koutarou had a hunch as to who’d sent it and knew that it most likely wasn’t a trap. The person he had in mind loved being dramatic, but also had a strangely serious side to him. Because of that, Koutarou didn’t believe there was any danger involved, but the girls were quick to stop him.

“Koutarou, wait! What if it’s a trap?!” Theia cried.

But the one who had the most intense reaction was Maki.

“Satomi-kun, we should examine it again before you do that! That way you can still open it if everything checks out!” she shouted in a harsh tone.

She forcefully snatched Koutarou’s hand away from the box and shot him a sharp glance. It was as if she’d gone back to her former life as an evil magical girl for a moment. But despite all appearances, it was quite the opposite. She was just that desperate to keep anything from happening to Koutarou.

“I get it, so don’t make that face, okay?”

The box had received the standard inspection before being brought aboard Blue Knight, but it hadn’t been examined using magic or spiritual energy. Koutarou understood what Maki was worried about, so he managed a smile and let go of the box.

“Jeez... You’re so careless, Satomi-kun...”

Maki had a tendency to be a little overprotective of Koutarou, but the incident at the hotel had really shaken her. She could feel it too. That Koutarou might end up dying somehow.

“Then I’ll leave it up to you, Aika-san, Kiriha-san, Clan.”

Maki would examine with magic, Kiriha would examine with spiritual energy, and Clan would examine with science. They were all skilled at their crafts, so it only took a few minutes to get the results.

“I think it’s okay.”

“We think so too, ho!”

“We can’t sense anything suspicious, ho!”

“...I see what you were saying, Veltlion.”

Maki and the haniwas simply reported their findings, but Clan had an exasperated expression on her face after X-raying the package. She seemed to have realized who it was from as well.

“That’s right. It’s another one of his super serious jokes. And if he sent it, he probably wants it to be opened right away.”

Koutarou put his hand on the box again. This time nobody tried to stop him. He removed the decorative ribbon and tore off the wrapping paper. The box underneath was from a famous luxury clothing brand in Forthorthe. Koutarou casually opened it.

“What poor taste to try and get Veltlion to wear this...” Clan muttered with a grimace.

“Leave him be,” Koutarou replied with a glance in Clan’s direction.

Inside the box was a full suit, including pants and even underwear. It was a vivid blue that matched Koutarou’s armor, and it was all accompanied by a card that had been folded over twice.

“So this is the real message...”

Koutarou was more interested in the card than the suit. He picked it up and began reading what had been written inside.

Dear Satomi Koutarou,

On the this coming Thursday, December 9th, we would like to hold a welcoming party for you. There’s a great deal to talk about, including the future. We humbly that you attend in the accompanying suit.

-Your friend

While the message on the card was brief, Koutarou knew what it meant. But since deciding his next move on his own would be dangerous, he handed the card over to Kiriha.

“What do you think?”

“Hmm... It seems like Elexis is officially calling for a conference. And it seems to be in regards to something he doesn’t want Vandarion knowing about.”

Kiriha’s interpretation of the message matched up with what Koutarou had suspected from it. Elexis wanted to have a conference, but he had taken such elaborate steps because he didn’t want the military to find out. This way, even if the military intercepted the package, they would have no way of knowing that it was Elexis who had sent it. But Koutarou and the others knew better since Elexis had sent Koutarou a suit once before. Even more telling was that the date and time had been specified using Earth conventions, so only Koutarou and the others would know exactly when he meant. It was a very clever way to disguise a secret.

“So you think so too?” Koutarou asked.

“Yes. The suit is less of a dress code and more of a way to establish contact,” Kiriha replied.

“I think the suit is just a present, or more like a prank. If he wanted to use a sign, he’d have chosen something like a hat or a badge,” Koutarou countered.

“That sounds just like him. It’s always so hard to tell if he’s being serious or if he’s just playing around,” added Theia.

“So what will you do, Master?” asked Ruth.

Koutarou pondered her question. They now knew who sent the package and what they wanted. All that was left was to figure out how to respond.

“Let’s meet him, I guess.”

“W-Wait a minute, Koutarou! In movies and anime, there’s always some hitch to a setup like this!”

Koutarou had decided to meet with Elexis, but Sanae suspected it was a trap. It was impossible for her to read the aura of the sender from the card. It had been printed from a computer, so the sender likely hadn't even touched it. There was no trace of strong emotion in it, just faint spiritual reside from the delivery person. She took that as a sign of danger.

"I understand what you're saying, but he's gone this far just to tell me he has something to talk about, so I'm curious. If this isn't a trap, he's being awfully cautious, so they must be about to do something big. If we ignore it and they start whatever it is on their own, we'll fall behind."

Koutarou was interested in the talk Elexis wanted to have. Considering how much trouble he'd gone to in order to contact him like this, there was a high chance that it involved a proposal about a large-scale military operation. It clearly had to be something important. That's what Koutarou believed, and he knew there was a chance if he ignored it that the Reborn Forthorthian Army could get off to a late start, meaning there was chance they'd lose out big time.

"That... might be true, but..." Yurika said hesitantly.

"They've even used biological weapons before. It can't hurt to hear what Elexis has to say now."

"Satomi-san, can't you just cheat at times like this?"

They were currently in the middle of war. If it was a trap and the Reborn Forthorthian Army lost Koutarou, the damage would be immeasurable. Yurika had been thinking about her own life recently, and it led her to believe that the best thing to do would be to cheat—to ignore Elexis this time.

It's exactly because times are like this, Yurika...

But Koutarou actually had an ulterior motive for wanting to talk to Elexis, and that concerned Harumi. If Elexis's proposal—whatever it may be—was within the bounds of what Koutarou could bring himself to agree to, it might not just accelerate the end of the war, but it might also let him avoid putting any more strain on Harumi. Koutarou was ready to face the potential danger of meeting Elexis because he was already keenly aware of the hazards of the war.

“There’s no need to worry. They’re actually surprisingly strait-laced. Besides, if it’s a trap, they’d try to go after you, Aika-san, and Nana-san at the same time.”

However, Koutarou didn’t share this with anyone. He knew what Harumi would think when she woke up.

The map printed onto the card didn’t lead to the space station where they had been attacked in their hotel, but to a different colony also orbiting Alaia. It was smaller than the space station, functioning more like a hub for development than a port. Right now it was docked to a large planetoid and was mining it for minerals.

“Master, wouldn’t it be better to bring more personnel with you?”

As Koutarou was about to step from the Cradle to the colony deck, Ruth called out to him from behind. Apart from Harumi who was still resting on Blue Knight, all the girls from room 106 had tagged along on the Cradle. They were all on standby in the case something happened.

“Aika-san alone will be enough. If there’s too many of us, they’ll put their guard up.”

Koutarou was only taking Maki with him. After careful consideration, she had been chosen as his escort for her personality, her magical prowess, her flexibility to respond in all kinds of situations, and because she knew more than anyone else about Darkness Rainbow. The instructions on the card hadn’t imposed a limit on the number of people Koutarou could bring with him, but he knew better than to overdo it. In the end, they’d all agreed on sending just Maki with him, although it was clear that Ruth was still worried—both as Koutarou’s friend and as a girl who loved him.

“At least take two or three more—”

“Ruth, I understand how you feel, but don’t trouble Koutarou too much,” interrupted Theia. “It’s the safest possible option for everyone just to send in the two of them.”

Koutarou and Maki were both were physically capable. And when it came to casting spells, less was more. Just taking another person or two would multiply the work Maki would have to do if things went wrong. Her mana

would have to be divided between them. That meant each additional person they brought along would reduce their chances of returning safely.

“I-I understand, but...”

In her heart, Ruth knew that. But she wanted to be a sacrificial pawn if it meant that Koutarou would be able to return safely.

“If you’re going, I am too.”

“Your Highness?! That’s...!”

“Then don’t say anything more.”

“Yes... I’m sorry, Master, Your Highness.”

Out of all the girls, the one having the hardest time was Theia. Her feelings for Koutarou were no different than Ruth’s, and she was the willful type to resolve things with her own strength. Her childhood friend, Ruth, knew better than anyone what it took for her to hold back those feelings in a situation like this. And knowing that, Ruth made no further objections.

“Ahaha, I can’t say it’s so bad to have someone like Ruth-san worrying about me,” Koutarou said lightheartedly.

“Is it just Pardomshiha?” Clan asked snidely.

“Yup.”

“Veltlion!”

“I know, I know. Everyone is worried.”

“Jeez, you’re always such a bully!”

“It’s not like I’m going off to die, you know.”

“Tch, then just hurry up and go already!”

“All right! I’ll see you guys later.”

“...I’ll definitely protect Satomi-kun, so don’t worry, everyone.”

“Come on, Aika-san! Let’s go!”

“Coming! We’ll be back, everyone!”

Maki chased after Koutarou in a sprint. When she caught up to him, the two of them stepped through the hatch together. Once they were gone, the atmosphere in the Cradle grew oppressive.

“They’re gone...” Sanae said with a heavy sigh.

Even though she was the first to say it, she wasn’t the only one sighing. The other girls felt more or less the same way she did.

“I’m honestly envious of Maki-chan...” Yurika sighed.

“Regardless of what happens, she gets to be right there with him...” Shizuka sighed too.

The two girls stared at the hatch Koutarou and Maki had left from. They had plenty of time on their hands to wrestle with the complex emotions in their hearts. While it was only thirty minutes from the specified meeting time in the message, they had no idea how long the conference would last. Regardless of the actual time, it already felt like a slow eternity to them.

“Everyone, now is not the time to space out. Koutarou and Maki might come running back at any minute. We need to be prepared.”

However, Kiriha had a different approach. She faced the other girls with her usual composed expression. No, perhaps it was even more composed than usual. Seeing that, Theia smiled bitterly.

“You’re as strong as ever...”

“I’ve waited for over ten years. I’ve waited all this time, and here I am. A few more hours is nothing. But isn’t it the same for you, Theia-dono?”

“Kiriha...”

Theia looked quite surprised, but she quickly understood what Kiriha was saying. A strong, lively light returned to her eyes.

“Okay, okay, you win! So what should I do?”

Elfaria had to live as the empress, so Theia had always lived with Ruth. She'd always been waiting for someone to fill that hole in her heart. If she was spaced out when that someone came running back for help, she would miss her chance to save him. While Maki was the only one protecting him directly, there was still plenty more to do.

"If we have to escape from here, there's a high chance we'll end up with a fleet chasing after us. In that case, it'd help if you were close to the gunner's seat."

"Got it. Since I'll be free until then, I'll send out a reconnaissance craft or something."

"Then I'll intercept communications alongside Her Highness."

"And me?" Sanae asked.

"Astral project and follow Koutarou, but make sure that Elexis doesn't find you."

"Aye aye, captain!"

"Yurika, you keep defensive spells up and regularly check to see if you can detect any other magic in the area."

"Got it."

"What about me?"

"Shizuka, you're though and can sense the presence of enemies, so go outside and patrol."

"Okay."

With Kiriha's instructions, the girls all got to their feet and were out of the Cradle's residential quarters in a hurry. That left only Kiriha and Clan in the room. Clan smiled as she adjusted her glasses. It was an honest smile, and a rare sight indeed.

"Kii, you're good at putting people into action."

"Everyone's always been waiting for someone like Koutarou to show up... Just like you, right, Onee-chan?"

Kiriha whispered the last part in a childish tone. She was implying that Clan's own feelings had changed around the time they met when Kiriha was much younger. Clan's smiling face immediately turned red at the accusation.

"...If you tell anyone that, I'll kill you both, Kii."

"Then let's make sure no one finds out."

It wasn't just Kiriha and Theia. Koutarou was the one that all of the girls had been waiting for. That's why learning that there was anything they could do to make sure he came home safely was all the motivation they needed.

Forthorthe had the technology to create artificial gravity, so there was no need to rotate a cylindrical space colony to simulate it. However, that being said, the traditional cylindrical design was strong and easy to make. Less corners made it more advantageous in terms of structural integrity, and it required less material to build. As such, it was still common for the space colonies of Forthorthe to be cylindrical even now. And since the shape was retained, it made sense to have it spin anyway so the city could be built on the inner wall. That way, they would only need to simulate gravity during emergency situations, allowing them to drastically reduce the amount of energy used.

But even with the traditional design, there were parts of the colony that didn't rotate, like the port where ships came and went. This was achieved by building the structure in the center of the cylindrical tube where the rotation was at its slowest, and having it rotate the opposite way. That made it functionally stationary, which in turn made it easier for vessels to dock or land.

Since the design of the cylindrical space colony was overall convenient and energy efficient, it was still quite practical and in wide use in Forthorthe. That's why after exiting the port and entering the residential district in the actual tube part of the colony, Koutarou and Maki were greeted with the strange sight of having the ground both at their feet and over their heads.

"It's when I see things like this that I realize I really have come to a different solar system..."

Koutarou sighed as he looked the city spreading out in front of—and above—him. It was night when they had made their way to the previous space station, and they'd had to leave in a hurry after the attack at the hotel, so he hadn't really had a chance to appreciate the station itself. That's why Koutarou was overwhelmed by the sight before him.

"Don't you think so, Aika-san?"

"Now's not the time for that, Satomi-kun. People are after your life, you know."

"I do know, but this is still incredible."

Koutarou couldn't deny that he might be in danger, but he didn't actually expect there to be any problems. He didn't think that Elexis and Darkness Rainbow would make an attempt his life with such a sloppy plan after all this time. And with that peace of mind, he casually made his way through the city in the space colony.

"Besides, if they were going to attack, they would have done it already, right? So you don't need to make such a scary face."

Just moving from the port to the city, there had been plenty of points where Koutarou and Maki could have been ambushed. And now inside the city, they were walking through a relatively empty warehouse district. Koutarou believed that if the entire thing was a trap, it was strange that they hadn't been attacked yet.

Besides, by having us walk through all these places it would have been easy to jump us, they're probably trying to tell us that they're not going to.

Based on Elexis's personality, Koutarou believed that was the most likely possibility. Granted, it wasn't like he had any proof, so he kept it to himself.

"...I just can't come to such trusting, confident decisions the way you can, Satomi-kun."

Maki, who was walking alongside Koutarou, was unable to hide her tension. She was wearing a women's suit that Ruth had prepared for her, which only served to emphasize the serious impression she gave off.

Really, Maki felt very similarly to the other girls who'd stayed behind on the Cradle.

"In your case, it's probably unavoidable. You've learned that fear the hard way."

"But I wouldn't be scared on my own."

"Sorry, Aika-san. I guess you're just babysitting today."

He had neither his sword nor armor. In an emergency he'd have to call for them, but he'd have to deal with the emergency empty-handed until an opening presented itself to do so. If Maki didn't protect him, he'd be defeated in an instant.

"That's not what I'm talking about. Jeez, you know what I mean..."

Frowning a little, Maki bumped her shoulder into Koutarou. It was extremely rare for her to be affectionate with Koutarou in a situation like this. Conversely, it could be said that the situation was putting so much pressure on her that she had no other choice.

"You are my everything. I can't have anything happen to you."

"Don't say something like that with a straight face, Aika-san."

"If I didn't say it with a straight face, you'd just brush it off."

"Well, that's kinda the dilemma of a shy boy."

"There's no need to be shy. I don't mind being your sacrificial pawn, Satomi-kun."

Whump!

"Ow!"

"*I* mind."

Perhaps because their conversation strayed from the task at hand, Maki's expression eased up. The two of them now looked like they were in the middle of a lovers' quarrel as they walked through the city.

“You know, I don’t hate hearing you say that...”

“Then make sure you protect yourself too, okay?”

“Yes, I think I will.”

After a little bit of back and forth, Maki recollected herself. Though she still looked a bit strained, she scanned her surroundings like usual, exactly as expected from an elite magical girl that had overcome countless battles.

Koutarou and Maki continued walking along, eventually coming to a large park in the middle of the city. The park was their real destination—the designated point of contact.

“It’s so big... Where should we go?”

The park was far bigger than Koutarou had expected. If it were smaller, he would have just waited at the center of it, but that wasn’t the case. The park was so large that it had a marathon course running around the perimeter.

“Don’t worry, Satomi-kun.”

Maki flashed a small smile. From her time in Darkness Rainbow, she had a good handle on how this kind of thing worked.

“They should have spotted us a while ago. They’ll contact us if we just keep walking.”

“So that’s why they made us wear these clothes...”

“Yes. Rather than specifying an exact location, this way is safer for both parties.”

They—most likely Elexis and his associates—had their reasons for not wanting to specify an exact location. If a third party happened to be there at the designated time, they might get followed after the meetup. In order to avoid that, it was safer not to pick a specific location, but instead find Koutarou ahead of time and contact him when the timing was right. That was the whole point of getting him to wear the suit—so he would be easy to pick out of a crowd.

“In fact, it’s a pretty common precaution not to choose a predetermined place.”

“I see. They’ve put a lot of thought into this. Then I guess we should leave the work to them. And in that case, then why not go Forthorthe sightseeing? Even though this is just a space colony...”

“Satomi-kun, jeez...”

Maki was feeling nervous, but Koutarou showed no sign of that as he looked around eagerly. She was a little jealous of that difference between them, but in the end, she chased after him without saying a word.

After entering the park, what surprised Koutarou the most were the colorful fish swimming in the artificial pond.

“This is incredible. What strange fish...”

“You didn’t see any fish when you were in Forthorthe before?”

“There weren’t a lot of fish being circulated for hygiene reasons, so I only saw three or four kinds. But they weren’t all strange like these are.”

The fish swimming in the pond were colorful and had peculiar forms. They looked less like the carps and ricefishes commonly seen in Japan, and more like tropical fish. In beautiful contrast to the plants in the surrounding woods, the fish made a vivid, colorful display in the pond quite unlike the image Koutarou had in his mind of a normal park.

“Maybe it’s because they’re aquarium fish?”

“Ah, right, this is a park after all.”

As they stood there looking down into the magnificent pond, a familiar voice called out to them from behind.

“This is the first time I’ve seen you make that face.”

The moment she heard the voice, Maki quickly turned around. As she did, a streak of flaming red caught her eye. It was the hair of the girl who had called out to them—her former colleague, Dark Crimson.

“Crimson?!”

Somewhere deep down, Maki had known that this would happen. While she was surprised by the suddenness of it, she wasn't actually surprised to see Crimson.

"I guess that means you made the right choice for yourself."

"...Yeah, I think so."

"That's good."

Even for Darkness Rainbow, Dark Crimson was something of an outlier. While she was part of an organization that was hostile to Koutarou and the others, she conducted herself in a way that made it hard to write her off as just another enemy.

"We've been running into each other a lot lately, Crimson."

"All of the work involving you gets dumped on me. Apparently because we got along the best or something."

"Heh, even though you're the worst at negotiating?"

"Just shut up and leave it at that!"

The reason Crimson behaved the way she did was her relationship with Maki. Darkness Rainbow was an individualistic organization through and through. Because of that, Crimson didn't really feel like Maki had betrayed them, and so their relationship continued even after she left. Of course, that only held true until a battle broke out. Sadly, in those terms, there was no denying that they had parted ways. And so Koutarou let the two girls do as they pleased without interrupting. He knew right well it might be the last time they could see each other like this.

"Well then... if we play around too much, I'll never hear the end of it from Maya, so let's get a move on."

However, contrary to Koutarou's intentions, Crimson cut short her friendly conversation with Maki. Although Koutarou was a little sorry for it, it gave him a chance to finally ask Crimson something.

"So this really is about something serious, isn't it?"

Koutarou stood up from leaning on the railing around the pond and stepped away from it as he spoke. Crimson nodded in response to his question.

“That girly-man wants to talk about it himself. He’s been busy with conferences and stuff lately, so it’s probably about that.”

According to what Crimson was saying, Elexis’s business was getting involved in something complicated. That was ultimately the reason she was in a hurry.

“Guide us there. Neither of us have much time, right?”

“This way.”

They were in the middle of a war. Neither Koutarou nor Elexis had much time to spare. Vandarion could catch onto them at any moment. And with that sense of urgency, Koutarou and Maki quickly followed Crimson out of the park.

Crimson took Koutarou and Maki to a small, old building at the edge of the city. However, its interior was far more luxurious than its exterior suggested. Wallpaper had been put up, antique furniture decorated the rooms, and there were paintings hanging on the walls. It was so posh that Koutarou half expected there to actually be a party as the card had suggested.

“Welcome, Koutarou-kun.”

In the furthest room on the top floor, where the CEO’s office would be in corporate building, Elexis was waiting for them. When he noticed Koutarou and the girls enter, he stood up from the desk where he was working and greeted them with a smile. But he wasn’t alone.

“Long time no see, Maki.”

“Maya-sama... It’s been a while.”

Maya was standing next to Elexis. She wasn’t very knowledgeable about the situation in Forthorthe, so she was going to leave the conference to Elexis, but she eagerly agreed to come when she learned Maki would be there.

“So what is this about?”

Koutarou was quick to cut to the chase. However, Elexis turned around instead of giving him the answer he wanted.

“Now hold on, Koutarou-kun. Let’s have a toast first.”

Elexis pulled a bottle from a nearby shelf. It was undistilled fruit wine, very similar to red wine on Earth. Even in Forthorthe it was common to drink this type of liquor before a meal or during celebrations.

“I’m not old enough to drink alcohol.”

“There’s nothing to worry about. This is Forthorthe.”

“Even under Forthorthe’s laws, I can’t drink yet.”

“Well that might depend on how much you're willing to abuse your authority, hmm?”

“You...!”

At first Koutarou thought that Elexis had pulled out the liquor as a joke, or maybe even as a symbol of his upper class wealth. But he was wrong. It was just an easy way to steer the conversation towards the main point.

“...What are you talking about?”

“Well, you see, I only have circumstantial evidence to base this off of...”

Elexis set the bottle down on his desk with a clunk, then turned back to Koutarou and shrugged.

“But this circumstantial evidence is rather convincing, I must say. Even ignoring all the hubbub about your armor, there’s your relationship with the royalty, the crest engraved on your sword, the silver-haired girl, magic, and dragons, not to mention everything that’s going on in the magical world and the underground world... Really, there’s just far too much to say that it’s all unrelated. And you just happen to be at the middle of it. Shall I go into more detail?”

“No, that’s enough. I get where you’re going.”

As Elexis had been to Earth, he knew a lot more about Koutarou than most Forthorthians. With that knowledge and the information that had surfaced recently, Elexis had reached a certain conclusion.

“Now if you ask yourself whether all that circumstantial evidence piled up by chance or for a reason, the latter is clearly more, well, reasonable. And with that in mind, we have grounds to assume a few things. For example, Koutarou-kun is at the very least the Blue Knight’s successor.”

While there was no way to say for sure if Koutarou had the Blue Knight's blood running in his veins or not, he undeniably had some portion of his power, rights, and duty. That was the conclusion that Elexis and Darkness Rainbow had reached. While it wasn't quite the truth, as far as the consequences of Elexis having figured it out were concerned, it was practically the same thing.

"Satomi-kun..."

Maki stepped forward as if to protect Koutarou. If they'd called Koutarou here knowing what they did about his connection to the Blue Knight, Maki couldn't imagine this would lead to anything good.

"Calm down, Maki."

"But Maya-sama..."

"I promise you that the two of you will return home safely today. I swear it on my name."

"You're being awfully nice today, Maya. Is it because your protégé is so cute?"

"Silence, you!"

"Okay, okay..."

"I understand, Maya-sama."

Maki was prepared for a fight, but she heeded her old master, Maya, and lowered her guard. She then backed off in order to not get in the way of Koutarou and Elexis, although she remained closer to Koutarou than before. Since she understood Maya's personality better than anyone, Maki fully believed in her. But even so, she knew that were other potential dangers still lurking.

You've gotten so cute in the short while I haven't seen you, Maki...

Maya had some thoughts on how much Maki—her former completely devoted and utterly strait-laced disciple—had changed, but she decided not to say anything in light of the current situation.

“So Elexis... Even if what you say is true, what do you want me to do?”

Whatever the game was, it was already afoot. Elexis had initially done a great deal believing that Koutarou was Theia’s knight, but now he was operating under the assumption that Koutarou was the Blue Knight’s successor. This was considerably more delicate than Koutarou had thought at first.

“It’s simple. Why don’t you side with us, Koutarou-kun?”

“What?! You think I’d do something like that?!”

Koutarou swiftly and emphatically turned down Elexis’s offer. Since Elexis was on Vandarion’s side, working with him meant kowtowing to Vandarion. That was something Koutarou knew he couldn’t do. He was ready to stop the talk right then and there.

“Calm down, Koutarou-kun. I’m not asking you to side with Vandarion. Quite the opposite, really.”

“...What do you mean?”

Koutarou had his back turned to Elexis as he was headed for the door, but those words stopped him in his tracks. He slowly turned back around.

“Based on Vandarion’s actions thus far, his likely course of action in the future is a little... outside of what we were expecting.”

“You mean you won’t be able to rule the country if you continue following Vandarion?”

“Putting it bluntly, that would be the case. But even with that aside, I’ve decided to leave Vandarion and act on my own, hence why I’ve come to request your cooperation.”

Elexis was trying to improve Forthorthe in his own way, and siding with Vandarion had simply been a means to accomplish that. But with Vandarion’s methods becoming increasingly intolerable, Elexis was ready to try a new plan. And that was to work with Koutarou instead.

“I get what you want to say, but that doesn’t change that you want to bring Her Majesty Elfaria down from the throne, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. My goal is to destroy this decrepit social order and create a new, wholesome system, after all.”

“At least you’re honest... But because of that, I can’t accept your offer.”

Koutarou and Elexis’s goals were fundamentally different. Because Koutarou wanted to protect the current social order, he couldn’t envision working with Elexis.

“No, of course not. But we’re not there yet, and I think we can get along until the next stage. You could call it a limited-time ceasefire, if you’d like.”

“And what is the next stage?”

“We’re planning to hold a royal family meeting to appoint a regent. With that, military command will be removed from Vandarion and the trial can be conducted fairly. Don’t you think we could cooperate until then?”

Normally the head of the Imperial Army was the empress herself. However, with the empress stripped of her authority and denounced for fraud and murder, control of the military was left to the parliament. And since Vandarion had control of the parliament, the military had fallen into his hands and become his own private army. In addition, Vandarion held sway over the court judges, which was one of the reasons why Elfaria refused to go to trial.

But that was only temporary. If a regent was appointed, Vandarion would lose his control over the army. A regent empress would also have the authority to appoint and dismiss judges, which could quash the influence Vandarion touted over the courts. She would even be able to demand that he produce evidence of the crimes Elfaria had been accused of. With a regent empress being an impartial third party, Vandarion would have no choice but to comply. If he didn’t, Vandarion and his men would finally be branded as the traitors they were.

“So from there, you’d be aiming to make this regent empress the real empress while we’ll be trying to reinstate Elfaria.”

“Indeed. The chances of success would certainly be different from what they are now, but there will undoubtedly be less bloodshed. Honestly, it’s

a good deal compared to continuing this war that's costing us the lives of citizens and soldiers alike."

Elexis's proposal hit Koutarou and the others where it hurt.

Less death, huh? He's... right...

In the past when Princess Alaia had fought against Maxfern who was after the country, she had worried that the fighting would all be pointless if he could actually pave the way for a better government. Fighting would mean battles that cost the lives of innocent citizens, so if there was another way... When he thought about it like Alaia had, Koutarou couldn't immediately reject Elexis's proposal.

"...And where do I come in?" Koutarou asked skeptically.

Elexis was an enemy Koutarou had faced time and time again. He had done unforgivable things. But this was about protecting the people rather than defeating the enemy, and for their sake, Koutarou held back his urge to reject him on premise and decided to listen to what Elexis had to say. Of course, Harumi's situation played a big part in his decision as well.

This... might just work out after all...

In contrast to Koutarou, Elexis's expectations were on the rise. In truth, he knew the possibility of Koutarou accepting his proposal was low. But based on the way Koutarou was acting now, there was still a chance. Sensing Koutarou's hesitation, Elexis carefully chose his next words.

"Your role is extremely important. Right now, a lot of citizens are starting to think of you as the Blue Knight. So we'd like you to acknowledge that you are the Blue Knight at the royal family meeting and declare your support for a regent empress."

Elexis wanted Koutarou to give his support for a temporary ruler as the Blue Knight's successor. The truth was that appointing a regent at this juncture could be incredibly dangerous. While it would draw in the citizens that hadn't yet taken a side, the hardcore supporters of both Elfaria and Vandarion would reject it adamantly. If this happened without proper planning, it would only make the situation worse.

That was where Koutarou became important. Based on how Koutarou fought, many of the citizens, especially those on Elfaria's side, had begun seeing him as their Blue Knight. If he were to officially acknowledge that he was the Blue Knight's successor and give his support to the appointment of a regent empress, the public might buy it. Really, Elexis didn't want or need Koutarou's strength on the battlefield. He was after his overwhelming strength of influence as the Blue Knight.

"So that's what you were up to..."

Koutarou was genuinely too surprised to think of anything else to say. This was something he'd have to consult with Elfaria and Kiriha about before making a decision. Elexis and his associates knew that, which was why Maya had been so willing to assure Koutarou that he and Maki would return home safely today.

"That's right. That's why what I said at first is important... Let's have a toast, Koutarou-kun."

Unlike Koutarou who was stunned and puzzled, Elexis was in a cheerful mood. He considered it a huge success that Koutarou hadn't rejected his offer outright. He had done everything he could now. All that was left was to wait for the gears of destiny to turn.

Decision

Thursday, December 9th

Following the conference with Elexis, Koutarou and Maki did indeed safely return to the Cradle as promised. The other girls were overjoyed at their arrival and made quite a scene over it, but the two people they were so relieved and excited to see didn't seem to share in the mood. Maki stayed silent, and Koutarou locked himself away in one of the cabins the moment he returned to think things through.

"To think Elexis was plotting something like this..."

Koutarou sat down in a chair in the cabin and held his head in anguish. He didn't know what to think of Elexis's proposal. He of course needed to

consult with Elfaria and Kiriha, but he wanted to figure out how he himself wanted to handle the situation before proceeding. Unfortunately, however, that answer wouldn't be easy to come by.

Whatever Elexis said, knowing how shrewd he is, it's probably safe to assume that there's a decent chance he's going to succeed...

A temporary ceasefire until they could strip Vandarion of his power. That was well enough, but considering Elexis had been the one to propose it, he undoubtedly had plans beyond that. And if he had that kind of strategic edge over them this early in the game, the chances of success for Koutarou and the others might actually be lower this way than if they continued fighting against Vandarion as they were.

But for the good of the citizens of Forthorthe, we should accept the proposal...

If the war continued, it would demand the highest toll from the citizenry. Koutarou was well aware of that reality. Vandarion's cruelty knew no bounds. That's why if they could put a stop to his rampage, the lives of the citizens should take priority over reinstating Elfaria. Prizing the lives of the people was the oath the royal families had sworn since Princess Alaia's time. From that point of view, there was something to gain from fighting this out politically rather than literally, even if it put the Reborn Forthorthian Army at a disadvantage.

Moreover, even if Elexis were to seize authority in the end, there was no reason to believe the country would be worse off. Things may end up quite different from the way they had been, but there was no contest between Elexis and Vandarion. In that sense, the overall risk was far lower. Koutarou was starting to think that it wasn't such a terrible deal, just as Elexis had said.

I have my own set of problems too. If Sakuraba-senpai annuls her contract with Signaltin, I'll lose a lot of my power. Could I even continue fighting then?

If they were to reject Elexis's proposal, the most dangerous scenario was Koutarou being killed. Koutarou's reputation right now was a considerable obstacle for both Vandarion and Elexis, which meant they would actively be trying to kill him at any given time. Battles like the one at the hotel

would only become more frequent, and Koutarou knew they would be harder and harder to survive without the help of Signaltin. While he might be able to make do in the short term, the long term prospects were grim. And when he finally did fall, his death would knock a pillar of support and morale out from under the Reborn Forthorthian Army. Vandarion would prey on that weakness.

“But even so, I still don’t want to just hand Forthorthe over to him...”

The same worry that had plagued Alaia during the harvest festival two thousand years ago was now brewing in Koutarou’s heart. In terms of rationality, he knew it was wrong for Elfaria and Theia to be chased off the throne when they’d done nothing wrong. On top of that, Vandarion should be properly defeated no matter what the risks were. But above all else, the lives of the citizens needed to be protected even if it meant overlooking what cold reason might indicate was the correct course of action. That was what Alaia had believed. That was the principle that had guided her actions. Koutarou knew that. He knew that maybe he should abide by the same principle, but he also didn’t want the country that Alaia and the royal families had protected for over two thousand years to fall into the hands of those who would destroy it. He just couldn’t accept that idea.

“What should I do...?”

Koutarou was torn. Protecting the nation. Protecting its people. Protecting what was important to him. Protecting his ideals. It was an impossible decision. Koutarou had unwittingly become Forthorthe’s hero, but right now the pressure that put on him felt like a thorn in his side.

“What do I have to do to get this all to work out...?”

As Koutarou was racking his brain all alone...

Beep!

“Master!”

The communications device on the wall of the cabin suddenly activated and projected a hologram of Ruth. While she was normally quite mild, both her expression and tone seemed agitated. The reason quickly made itself apparent.

“Harumi-sama has woken up! She says she wants to speak with you directly!”

“What?!”

Hearing what Ruth said, Koutarou stood up so fast that the chair he was sitting in kicked backward. He then dashed out the cabin and headed for the bridge so he could hear the details in person. Despite his turmoil a moment ago, Elexis was the last thing on his mind now.

While Koutarou and the others were away, Elfaria was in charge of taking care of Harumi. Elfaria herself had insisted on it. If Harumi was the reincarnation of Alaia, then as a member of the Mastir family, she refused to leave her care to anyone else. That’s why the initial report of Harumi waking up had come from Elfaria. Apparently upon waking, Harumi’s hair was glowing silver, and she specifically requested that Elfaria call for Koutarou.

Making his way back to base on Blue Knight, Koutarou headed straight for Harumi’s hospital room. Knowing Harumi had collapsed because he put too much strain on her, Koutarou wanted to confirm for himself that she was okay as soon as possible.

Knock knock!

“Sakuraba-senpai!”

Koutarou opened the door in a hurry without even waiting for a response after knocking. The sliding door flew open with such force that it bounced against the frame and nearly slid shut again. Koutarou jumped into the room and closed the door all the way behind him.

“Welcome, Satomi-kun.”

Sitting up on the bed against the far wall of the hospital room was Harumi with glowing silver hair and clear eyes, smiling calmly and gently like normal. The moment he saw her like that, Koutarou almost fell down on the spot overwhelmed with relief. But his urge to truly make sure she was okay kept him on his feet, albeit just barely, as he approached the bed.

“Senpai, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. This is nothing. You’ve always been such a worrywart, Koutarou-sama.”

“...Senpai?”

“Yes?”

Something about the way Harumi was talking threw Koutarou off. She usually called him "Satomi-kun." If she was calling him "Koutarou-sama," then...

“It seems Her Highness is present again,” said Koutarou, assessing the situation.

“So it does. I can’t really tell myself.”

Her silver hair fluttered and she smiled, both like Harumi and like Alaia. She could no longer distinguish the two.

“Neither can I,” he admitted.

“What a strange feeling. A dream I thought was impossible has really come true,” she replied in a soft voice.

“Do you mean wanting to become Her Majesty Alaia? Or do you mean wanting to become a normal girl?”

“Oh, Satomi-kun... Heehee, there’s no getting anything past you, Koutarou-sama... I think it’s both. We were both envious of what the other had.”

Chink.

Harumi reached for Signaltin, which was propped up against the bed.

“And now... we have fulfilled both those wishes. I am your princess and, at the same time, I’m a normal girl. There’s nothing more blissful than this.” Harumi presented the sword to Koutarou. “So please take this. This is what Harumi and Alaia both want.”

In order for Harumi to stand at Koutarou’s side as a knight, she needed Alaia. And in order for Alaia to live as a normal girl, she needed Harumi. Both girls wanted to protect Koutarou, no matter what the cost was. That

wish had remained unchanged even with the passage of two thousand years.

“I can’t accept that. You should know why.”

However, Koutarou shook his head. Signaltin had half of her life inside of it. If he continued fighting, it would only put more strain on her and she’d likely collapse again. There was no guarantee she would wake up a second time. And the more strain he put on her, the darker those odds grew.

“Please release your contract with the sword! At this rate, something terrible is going to happen!” Koutarou pleaded.

“I don’t care what happens to me, Satomi-kun. You’re what’s important,” she replied with a smile.

“That can’t be true!”

“But it is. Even if I were to lose my life, as long as you carry that sword, I will be reincarnated and find my way to you as many times as it takes, Koutarou-sama.”

Unlike two thousand years ago, Alaia was no longer shouldering Forthorthe. She could do what she wanted now, including sacrificing her life to protect the man she loved.

“Stop messing around!”

It was the first time Koutarou had ever been angry at Harumi or Alaia. What she had was something he simply couldn’t accept, and it pushed him over the edge.

“Do you understand how those of us you’d leave behind would feel?! What are we supposed to tell Sakuraba-senpai’s family?! How about the drama club, your classmates, and all of the other people that will be sad if you don’t come home?!”

Koutarou just couldn’t believe her short-sightedness. She hadn’t thought of the people left behind on Earth. There were people waiting for Sakuraba Harumi, and he wanted her to remember that.

“You’re the one that doesn’t understand, Satomi-kun. Can you imagine how Theiamillis-san, Clan-san, Ruth-san, Sanae-san, Kiriha-san, Yurika-san, Maki-san, or Shizuka-san would feel... if you were to die?”

The girls all had a special connection with each other, and they each knew how the others felt in that regard. Every last one of them was willing to lay down their life for Koutarou. So if Koutarou died, each one of them would be left with the insidious question of why it hadn’t been them instead. Those nine girls would be lost to the grief, the guilt, and the despair of their loss.

“That doesn’t mean that you can just sacrifice yourself!”

“It’s not like I want to die. I love Koutarou-sama and everyone else... my parents and everyone at school...”

“Then—”

“I don’t know what path you will take forging ahead. However, no matter the path, you will run into trouble at some point, and I want to be the one to face that trouble first. I will always return to your side with the sword’s guidance.”

Despite what Koutarou was angry about, Alaia within Harumi understood the situation perfectly. If Koutarou were to stop using Signaltin, it would put him in a tight spot. That would eventually come to a head, and rather than having someone lose their life over it, Koutarou using Signaltin to prevent that was the better option. While Harumi would be reincarnated, Koutarou and the other girls didn’t have that power.

If the fighting continues, Sakuraba-senpai will die...

Harumi’s intentions were pure, and she was right. The reality of it was all too cruel. And that being the case, Harumi likely wouldn’t revoke the contract with Signaltin. That way the protective magic would continue to work even if he didn’t actively use it, and Harumi could continue using magic. With that future ahead of them, Koutarou was certain that if the war continued, it meant that Harumi was going to die.

Once Koutarou was done talking with Harumi, he took Kiriha and Clan with him to visit Elfaria’s room. He wanted to consult with the three of them on how to proceed. After speaking with Harumi, Koutarou had mostly made up his mind. The meeting with Elfaria, Kiriha, and Clan was to realistically discuss how to go about things.

“So you finally feel like speaking with us, huh?” Clan started.

“Sorry, but with things being the way they were...” Koutarou half mumbled.

“...It must have been quite the conference.”

Clan was teasing Koutarou at first, but the look on his face was a special one she had seen several times in the past. And seeing it now, she knew what it meant. Clan now prepared herself to hear to what he had to say. She was no longer just some sheltered princess.

“Did you make your decision?” Kiriha asked.

“Kiriha-san...” Koutarou looked a little surprised. “You know what Elexis asked me?”

“Roughly, yes. There aren’t many topics that would warrant calling just you in for a covert conference. And out of those, there are even fewer that would give you such pause.”

Kiriha revealed what she had put together on her own. She had a rough idea of what Elexis had wanted to talk about, and she had silently waited for Koutarou to make his decision on the matter.

“So Layous-sama, what did Elexis say specifically?”

Elfaria had come to a similar conclusion. While she didn’t have much information on Elexis, she had her experience as a politician working for her.

“Elexis asked me to switch sides.”

“Seriously?!” Clan nearly shouted.

Because Kiriha and Elfaria had already put some of the pieces together, she was the only one surprised when Koutarou finally revealed why Elexis wanted to meet.

“Yeah,” Koutarou confirmed.

“I see... But changing sides would mean working with Vandarion, so you of course refused, didn’t you?”

While she was surprised, Clan didn’t suspect for a moment that Koutarou would betray the royal families. She quickly recollected herself and urged Koutarou to continue.

“I was ready and willing to, but then Elexis said something unbelievable...”

Listening quietly to what he said, Kiriha and Elfaria both looked him straight in the eyes. They had expected pretty much everything up until this point, but the rest of it was up in the air. This was the part of the story they’d really wanted to hear.

“He told me he wants me to help because he wants to break away from Vandarion and strike out on his own. Or more specifically, he wants my influence in order to do that.”

“That makes sense. The citizens of Forthorthe are starting to see you as the Blue Knight. If he wants to start something new now, he’d love to have you as the figurehead,” mused Kiriha.

“If I were to use your title, it would be interpreted as me trying to exploit the legend for my own gain. But there’s a much lower risk of that accusation if an unrelated third party has you on their side. Of course he’d try and make use of that,” explained Elfaria.

“So Veltlion, what exactly is that man trying to pull?” Clan asked.

“He wants to hold a royal family meeting and appoint a regent empress. And he wants me to support this regent.”

“Aha, so that’s why he’s after your title!”

Clan finally got her head around what was really going on, and she now understood what Koutarou was concerned about. He could protect the citizenry while technically not betraying the royal families, but it would mean a heavy compromise.

“And I suppose he proposed a temporary ceasefire until Vandarion is stripped of his current power,” said Kiriha.

“Yeah. From there, we’d aim to reinstate Elle while they try and put the regent empress on the throne for good.”

“So we’d be moving from war to a political battle... Honestly, this will probably hamper my chances of being reinstated compared to our odds of victory if we keep fighting,” Elfaria contemplated aloud.

“I was thinking that too,” responded Koutarou. “They wouldn’t propose a plan like this if it wasn’t advantageous for them, but at the same time, working with them will mean far less bloodshed. Not to mention that even in the worst case scenario, losing to Elexis sounds a lot better than losing to Vandarion.”

“How problematic...” Clan said as she rubbed her chin. “If we take the logical step towards victory, we will pay the price for it in blood. But if we do what we have to in order to save those lives, we risk compromising our objective of reinstating Elfaria. And without Elfaria on the throne, Elexis will eventually end the imperial government itself...”

“So we are forced to choose between the lives of the Forthorthian people today, or the beliefs and sacrifices of the Forthorthian people two thousand years ago...” said Elfaria in a somber voice.

That was the very core of the problem. Would they demand sacrifice from the citizens alive today, or would the render the countless sacrifices made to protect Forthorthe in the past pointless? Either way felt wrong.

“Making this decision even more difficult problem is the problem with Signaltin,” added Koutarou.

“Ah...”

Clan’s eyes opened wide. She had overlooked that aspect.

“Vandarion’s attacks are already becoming more and more fierce. If we continue fighting, the strain on Sakuraba-senpai will only increase. If this keeps up, then...”

Koutarou couldn’t bring himself to say the rest out loud, but everyone knew what he meant. Harumi would die. The battles ahead of them would be even harsher. Harumi’s condition worsening after they went to war was one thing, but the risk now that it was happening in the middle of said war was immeasurable. In that sense, they all wished a little that they had gone into this fight without relying on the power of Signaltin.

“And if we were to fight without Signaltin now, our chances of success would be greatly affected,” Kiriha said. She picked up where Koutarou left off, but she didn’t dare bring up what even Koutarou hadn’t been able to say. “After all, they enemy is continually targeting Koutarou, and

Koutarou wielding Signaltin in this fight is an important symbol to the citizens."

The people of Forthorthe were beginning to see Koutarou as the Blue Knight, and that alone was increasing the support that the Reborn Forthorthian Army was getting. That's why Vandarion was aiming for a low blow to their public image by killing off Koutarou. If the Blue Knight fell, the people would inevitably think that he hadn't really been the Blue Knight after all. Vandarion could use that to his advantage.

"Without Signaltin, even we were to win, there would be more casualties. And we probably wouldn't come out unscathed either. Some of our own might..." Kiriha continued.

Even if Koutarou survived, without being able to use Signaltin, their overall chances of victory were much lower and there would undoubtedly be more casualties. If the Type One Revised made a reappearance, for example, the battle would be far bloodier without the power of the sword. But Kiriha was right. Part of it was a matter of image. The people of Forthorthe were expecting a graceful victory from Koutarou with Signaltin in hand. If he floundered, especially without the sword, the people would begin to lose their faith in him. And without the support of the people, the Reborn Forthorthian Army would take severe losses in the long run, even if they won the war.

"The worst situation would be fighting and losing without Signaltin... I don't even want to think about the scale of the casualties..." Clan mumbled.

The absolute worst case scenario was to immediately stop using Signaltin and then ending up unable to defeat Vandarion. It would mean an inconceivably high death toll, and then to make matters worse, Vandarion would seize control of the country. It was easy to imagine what kind of future would await them then, but there wasn't anyone present that wanted to entertain the thought.

Either way, there would be casualties. That was the kind of trouble ahead of them that Harumi had talked about. The mere thought of it was weighty, not too dissimilar from the silence that descended on the room. It was minutes before anyone said another word.

“So what do you want to do, Koutarou?” Kiriha finally asked.

“Well...”

And so Koutarou began explaining to the three girls the future he had in mind.

After talking to Clan, Kiriha, and Elfaria, Koutarou found himself standing in an observation room aboard the Blue Knight. From there, he could see stars in every direction apart from directly below him. It was an unfamiliar view, but he felt somewhat at ease staring at the stars. He could almost forget that he was far, far away from his home on Earth.

“What do you think... of the stars... in Forthorthe, Koutarou?”

Calling out to Koutarou from the door as she entered was Theia. She’d run all the way there once he requested her presence, so she was breathing heavily as she spoke.

“It feels strangely nostalgic. Maybe it’s because I’ve seen it before, even if it was two thousand years ago and from a different planet.”

“Nostalgic...? Ha... Ahahahaha!”

Theia burst into laughter at Koutarou’s answer. Confused by that, Koutarou turned around to look at her. When he did, he saw her wiping away tears from laughing too hard.

“Did I say something funny?”

“No, it’s on me. Th-The truth is... I worried about something once.”

Theia looked up at Koutarou. The tears she’d tried to wipe away were still running down her cheeks.

“If I were to take you as my groom, wouldn’t you gaze up at the stars and longingly look for your home among them?”

“Ah, yeah...”

When she said that, Koutarou understood why Theia was laughing as well. Now he was smiling too.

“Yet here you are saying you feel nostalgic. Looks like I was worried for nothing.”

Bump.

Theia kicked Koutarou’s leg, but not hard enough to hurt him. Koutarou reciprocated the gesture and bopped her on the head the same way.

“It wasn’t for nothing, Your Highness. As a knight, it’s an honor to have my lord think of me like that.”

“I said groom! You bully!”

Thud.

Theia’s second kick was serious.

“Ow!”

“Anyway... what did you want to talk about, Koutarou?”

Really, Theia wanted to goof around with Koutarou for as long as she could, but she was also interested in why he’d called for her. Her compromise was playing around a little and then getting down to business.

“You’re so selfish...” Koutarou said, shaking his head.

Koutarou’s leg was still throbbing from where Theia had kicked him, however, so he wasn’t exactly in the mood to be serious or diplomatic with her. Fortunately, the pain started to subside after a few seconds.

“Not as much as you are,” Theia jabbed.

“...That might be true,” he acquiesced.

After exchanging a few words, the pain had disappeared completely. As it did, Koutarou remembered he had a reason to hurry. He recollected himself and began explaining to Theia why he’d called her here.

“There’s something I need to apologize to you for.”

“What?”

“I can’t tell you what I talked with Elexis about.”

“Why not? I’m your lord!”

“That’s exactly why. If you start acting differently because of it, then it will make what I’m trying to do harder.”

“...That sounds like you’re calling me an idiot in a roundabout way.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t help but feel that way when I see your press conferences.”

“Don’t bring that up! That’s unfair, Koutarou!”

Theia was aware of her flaw. She knew she wasn’t good at keeping things secret, but even so, she was still frustrated that she was being left out of whatever Koutarou was up to. He’d even told Kiriha and Clan about it.

“I know that you’re unhappy, but I want to ask you a favor despite that.”

“Fine! But I won’t promise I’ll do it!”

Now in a poor mood, Theia cast a sidelong glare in Koutarou’s direction as she stood there pouting with her arms crossed and her cheeks puffed out. Like this, Theia might even turn him down out of childish defiance, even if what he was asking was important. Knowing that, Koutarou still chose to ask her anyway.

“Over the next few days, a ton of things are going to happen that will surprise you. During that time, no matter what I do or say... can you just put a stupid amount of trust in me?”

“Th...”

Hearing Koutarou’s words, Theia reached her emotional tipping point. She was a mess. She laid into Koutarou, but her tirade fell slightly left of what Koutarou had expected.

“You don’t even need to ask something like that, you fool! If I can’t trust you, then who could I possibly trust?!”

Theia angrily clenched her fist and thrust it out towards Koutarou. Seeing it coming, Koutarou chose not to move out of the way and took it straight on.

Wham!

With Theia's full strength behind it, the moment her fist connected with Koutarou's right cheek, he felt the impact through his entire body. His vision blurred, then blacked out for a moment.

"Do you think I fell in love with you without trusting you?! You're the only one I have! Why can't you understand that?! Of course I believe in you no matter what!"

Wham!

He took the next blow to his left cheek.

"...That hurts, Theia."

"You're such an idiot, you don't understand anything unless it hurts!"

Theia was in tears. Even though she was the one throwing the punches, she was acting like she was the one who being hit. Seeing her like that, Koutarou gently grabbed on to her left fist still touching his cheek.

"I get it thanks to you. Now please just believe in me and wait like a princess in a fairy tale."

"Very well. But expect to be punished once you get back."

Theia wasn't crying because she was frustrated over being left out. She was crying because she'd realized what Koutarou really meant when he asked her to wait. It was his way of saying goodbye, and she knew that depending on how things played out, he might not be coming back.

"I know. I'll do whatever you say then."

"Then you may go, and you have my permission to do whatever you think is necessary without reservation."

"...As you wish, my princess."

Theia desperately tried to choke down her tears and smile, but she couldn't hold out in the end. And so the last thing Koutarou saw as he left Theia was her crying face doing its best to manage a smile through the tears.

The first one to notice that Koutarou was gone was Sanae. She'd opened a bag of snacks to eat and had gone looking for Koutarou to share it with, but no matter where she looked on Blue Knight, she couldn't find him. She then went to ask the other girls if they'd seen him, but after talking to Ruth, Shizuka, and Yurika, Sanae learned that not only was Koutarou gone, but Maki, Kiriha, and Clan were also missing. Sanae then went to Theia, but it seemed to be the first she'd heard of it either.

"I thought that you'd know where Koutarou and the others went, Theia!"

"I see... Koutarou is gone, huh..."

Theia had a faint idea that this was ahead of her, but learning that he'd actually left was still a shock.

"So you do know something!"

"No. He didn't tell me any details at all. I could only vaguely guess that he was going to go somewhere."

The strength drained from Theia's shoulders as they drooped. Seeing her aura and the way she was acting, Sanae realized that Theia really didn't know anything. She was pretty torn up about it.

"What about you, Harumi? Do you know anything?" Sanae asked.

Sanae had found Theia visiting Harumi in her hospital room. She figured if she was there, she might as well try asking her too.

"No. Satomi-kun didn't say anything to me. It seems he took Signaltin with him, but they've made it so I can't find its location by tracking its mana. And he's not answering my calls either..."

Harumi looked down in a melancholy fashion. Koutarou had only revealed the truth to Kiriha, Clan, and Maki and taken them with him. Since she had only just regained consciousness, Harumi knew why she hadn't been taken too. That much was obvious, but it still hurt that Koutarou had left without saying anything to her.

“I see... I wonder where they went...” Sanae mumbled.

“Your Highness, it must have to do with the conference with Elexis.”

As Sanae’s voice trailed off, Ruth—who had come with Sanae—offered her own take on the situation. It stood to reason that Koutarou acting in secret had something to do with his secret meeting with Elexis.

“Probably. I don’t know what he’s planning on doing, but it must be quite drastic. He took Kiriha, Clan, and Maki with him after all.”

The thing Kiriha, Clan, and Maki had in common was that they were all intelligent. If Koutarou took the three of them with him, there was no doubt that their goal was reconnaissance, diplomacy, or espionage. And considering the timing, there was no way it was just something minor. Just as Koutarou had said to Theia, something surprising was surely going to happen.

“There’s so much we don’t know...” Sanae sighed.

Silence ruled the hospital room. Not knowing what Koutarou was trying to do, all the six girls left behind could do was imagine what was really going on. There was a growing anxiety in each of them.

“Um... Wouldn’t your mom know something about Satomi-san and the others, Theia-chan?”

Unusually enough, Yurika was the one to come up with a good idea. While Yurika was always lazing about, she couldn’t do that with Koutarou gone. And after racking her brain on the matter, talking to Elfaria was the solution she’d come up with in her own way.

“You’re on fire today, Yurika-chan. He wouldn’t have left without saying anything to Her Majesty!”

Shizuka smiled and clasped her hands in front of her chest. She believed that Yurika was right. The other girls felt the same way too.

“All right, then let’s hurry to mother—”

Beep, beep, beep, beep!

But before they could put the plan into action, Ruth's bracelet sounded out an alarm. It was the signal for a medium-level threat, so there were no loud sounds or flashing lights, but the six girls felt the tension in the room rise. They all waited with bated breath as Ruth tapped away on the console of her bracelet to figure out what had happened.

"Your Highness, this is serious!"

"What's happened?!"

"It seems that a portion of the fleet headed towards the rally point has been attacked by Vandarion!"

Theia's personal battleship, Blue Knight, was powerful, but it was still unthinkable for it to travel the Forthorthian solar system on its own. For safety, they'd planned to meet up with an allied escort fleet. However, according to what Ruth was saying now, part of that fleet had been attacked by the Imperial Army before they could group up. It would have been harder to strike at the fleet once they were all together, so of course Vandarion would take this chance to try and pick off smaller units of ships.

"Ugh, we'll have to talk to mother later then! Men, to the bridge!"

"Theiamillis-san, I'll come too."

"You just stay here, Harumi! This'll be a fleet battle anyways!"

While everyone was anxious about Koutarou and the missing girls, it wasn't a problem they could resolve right away. What was important right now was handling the crisis before them.

By the time Theia and the others got to the bridge, the main computer's AI had already begun gathering information. Intel on where the battle was taking place, the numbers and positions of allies and enemies, and all kinds of other data was being displayed in hologram form.

"What's the situation?!" Theia demanded.

"Allied forces are outnumbered two to three. If left alone, there is a 95 percent chance that the allied fleet will suffer fatal damage," the AI responded.

Being attacked was a small fleet consisting of one battleship, one carrier, one destroyer, and one defense ship. In comparison, the attacking Imperial Army had that, plus an extra battleship and an extra destroyer. The difference in firepower was significant enough that the allied fleet would surely fall without any aid.

“Can’t we send reinforcements?!”

“Negative. Due to the margin of error while navigating spacetime, reinforcements reaching target location before the fleet is destroyed is unlikely.”

Because the enemy had attacked while the fleet was in the middle of preparing for spacetime navigation, or warping, escaping with their own power was next to impossible. Moreover, even if they were to send allied reinforcement, because of the imprecise nature of warping, it was expected to take over ten minutes for backup to reach the battlefield. The odds of the battle being over by then were high.

“Wait, wouldn’t it be possible with Blue Knight?!”

However, Theia hadn’t given up hope yet. Judging from the star map, she believed her ship would be able to make in time. Fortunately, Blue Knight had already finished preparations for warping in order to reach the rally point. But since the allied fleet was much closer to Blue Knight’s current location than the rally point, it wouldn’t take anything more than adjusting the warp settings for them to change their destination. A royal flagship had a much more accurate warp drive than a standard warship. What would take other ships ten minutes would only take Blue Knight one, and the odds were much better that the allied fleet would be able to hold out for that long.

“Negative. While the contributions of this ship may make up the difference in combat capabilities, the chance of victory is still estimated to be less than 50 percent due to entering combat after the battle has started. It is not strategically viable with royalty on board.”

“But I’m not just any royalty! With a 50 percent chance, I won’t lose!”

“Warning: Recommending strategic judgement.”

“Silence! Stop complaining and warp to the target location!”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Despite the AI’s objections, Theia was full of confidence. The calculated odds of victory were less than 50 percent, but that was strictly based on the abilities of a royal class battleship. Without Koutarou on board, Blue Knight was a pretty standard battleship for its class, but its crew and captain were a different story. With access to magic and spiritual energy, a fifty-fifty chance was as good as victory. Theia was sure of it.

By the time Theia’s Blue Knight reached the target destination, the battle had indeed already commenced. The other information from her ship’s AI seemed to be accurate too. The allied fleet had four ships while the Imperial Army had six, and they were both in the middle of firing on each other. And although they were putting up a fight, since the allied fleet lacked firepower, they were losing. The barrier of the defense ship at the front was already starting to collapse.

“Flag!” Theia ordered.

“Warning: There is a chance of drawing concentrated fire,” the AI warned.

“That’s exactly what I want! Just shut up and do it!”

“As you wish, my princess. Deploying beam flag. Changing IFF signal.”

Approaching the fight, Theia had her ship raise its flag. While it was called a flag, it wasn’t a real one, but rather the image of one created using beams. The golden beams of Theia’s flag in particular formed a flower crest over Blue Knight when she activated it. Simultaneously, the ship’s IFF signal changed from the standard one to a special one. Together, the flag and signal indicated that princess Theiamillis was on board. It was a sign that the Mastir family that had gone undefeated for two thousand years had stepped onto the battlefield.

“Your Highness, one of the battleships and the two destroyers are turning around! They’re headed this way!” Ruth called with a sense of urgency in her voice.

“Looks like they panicked! That’ll make you good targets!” Theia called back in excitement.

The fact that Theia herself had come out was significant to the Imperial Army soldiers. With public opinion shifting, pointing weapons at members of the royal family was getting harder and harder for the soldiers, even as enemies. Even the soldiers who didn't feel the drop in morale tended to panic. Only those who didn't fit either mold were able to remain calm, but sadly for them, the captains of those three ships were far from calm right now.

"One Imperial Army destroyer has taken serious damage! It's falling back from the front lines! The remaining two ships have taken minimal damage! They are still on course for us!" Ruth shouted.

Not even a novice would miss the opportunity of an enemy ship disengaging combat to change course. The Reborn Forthorthian Army had focused their attacks as the three ships had done exactly that, causing serious damage to one of the destroyers. The remaining two ships, however, had hardly taken any damage and were still heading towards Blue Knight in order to defeat Theia.

"Well done! You have my praise!" Theia hollered back to Ruth.

With the enemy splitting up into two units, things were potentially turning in the Reborn Forthorthian Army's favor. The four ships of the allied fleet were now only facing off against three ships: the Imperial Army's battleship, carrier, and defense ship. With superior numbers, they should be fine as long as they didn't do anything stupid. And if Theia could do something about the battleship and destroyer heading towards Blue Knight, the Reborn Forthorthian Army's victory was assured.

"Sanae, Yurika, I'm counting on you!"

"Aye aye, captain!"

"I'll do my best!"

"Don't think you can defeat us with just two ships!"

There were several methods of controlling Blue Knight, and right now Theia was sitting in something akin to a fighter pilot seat. She turned Blue Knight to face the ships approaching from the bow and put the thrusters to max. While it looked like a reckless charge at first glance, Theia knew exactly what she was doing.

“Maiden Power, Full Charge! Annnnnd.... Sanae-channel!”

“Greater Perfect Illusion! Modifier: Effective Area, Colossal!”

Thanks to Sanae, Theia’s reflexes were increased to their very limits and she could sense enemy attacks before they came. On top of that, Yurika used her magic to create several fake battleships and destroyers around Blue Knight, sending the Imperial Army into tumult. Of course, after creating illusions over a such a wide area that were so convincing that they would even fool Forthorthian sensors, Yurika had practically used up all of her mana. All she could do from this point on was cheer, but considering the situation, it was a good plan.

“Good job, you two!” Theia congratulated them.

“Victory!” Sanae cheered.

“The rest is up to you!” Yurika added.

Satisfied with what Sanae and Yurika had accomplished, Theia charged right into the enemy fleet. Now that the enemy was firing at the illusionary fleet too, only a few attacks came for Blue Knight. And with a limited number of attacks to dodge, Theia could evade them all with the power she’d borrowed from Sanae. Even if a couple of shots slipped past her, it wouldn’t be enough to get through the ship’s barrier. Theia’s reckless charge, in the end, wasn’t reckless at all.

“It looks like Uncle and I won’t even get a turn at this rate.”

“Just leave this to me!”

“We’ll make sure you won’t have to go out, Shizuka-sama!”

Of course, Theia wasn’t just playing on the defensive. She was skillfully controlling Blue Knight’s evasive maneuvers while working on a counterattack.

“Deploying unmanned fighters!” Ruth announced.

“Hand control of the main armament over to me!” Theia called.

“As you wish, my princess. Changing FCS mode of main armament to manual operation,” the AI responded in its synthesized voice.

“Now it’s our turn!” Theia cried.

Boom, boom, boom!

As Theia repeatedly fired the anti-ship beam cannon, the entirety of Blue Knight shook slightly. Her attacks were faster and more precise than when the artillery was left on automatic firing. She also knew she would need to be the one in control of firing in order to defeat the enemy without completely destroying them.

“Enemy destroyer’s distortion field has disappeared,” the AI informed her.

Theia’s bombardment had been accurately focused on the top of the destroyer’s barrier. Thanks to the considerable difference in generator output between Blue Knight and the destroyer, the barrier went down almost immediately. However, because her fire had been focused on the top of the destroyer, only a couple of antennas had been damaged when the barrier buckled.

“Ruth, now!”

“Understood! Commencing laser bombardment!”

Now that the enemy’s barrier was down, they were playing right into Theia and Ruth’s hands. All twelve laser cannons installed on Blue Knight were fired simultaneously. But they weren’t shooting at the destroyer; they were aiming for the empty space around it. However, upon reaching that supposedly empty space, the lasers suddenly changed direction. That was thanks to the unmanned fighters Ruth had released earlier. The lasers bounced off the reflectors on the unmanned fighters and assaulted the destroyer from normally impossible angles.

“Enemy destroyer has taken minimal damage, but the ship has been crippled,” the AI reported.

Blue Knight’s lasers only shot through the destroyer’s FCS, the hull’s control systems, and the ship’s thruster controls. With that, the destroyer was completely incapacitated. While the damage itself was relatively

minor, with no way to defend or attack, all the crew on board could do was wait for rescue.

“You sure do terrifying things awfully casually, Ruth...”

The vessels of the Imperial Army were all Forthorthian ships, so while they had known where to fire for maximum efficiency, actually pulling it off was a feat only Ruth could have managed. There’s no way a normal operator would have been able to make all of the necessary arrangements. Because Theia was an expert marksman herself, she understood just how difficult of a move it was. That’s why she hadn’t expected perfect results, but seeing the destroyer now left completely dead in the water, Theia was shocked.

“However, from here on out, it’s time for my specialty... forcing my way through!”

With a fearless smile, Theia shot down the missiles that the point defense laser system had missed. Now that the destroyer was incapacitated, all that was left was a single battleship. Theia was more than confident she wouldn’t lose in one-on-one.

“Draw the anti-ship energy sword! Shooting mode!”

“As you wish, my princess. Drawing anti-ship energy sword Signaltin in shooting mode.”

Theia held the massive sword equipped to the right arm of the ship as a gun. It was essentially a massive beam sword, but it also had the capability shoot out its energy in bullet form. That was Theia’s weapon of choice for taking out the battleship.

“How about this?!”

Boom!

As Theia fired, the massive recoil rocked Blue Knight. The energy sword on the right arm had the second most power of all the weapons on Blue Knight after the antimatter cannon Genesis Buster equipped on the left arm. And since anitmatter cannons couldn’t be controlled but so precisely, the energy sword was the better weapon when something other than totally destroying the enemy was the goal.

Boom! Boom!

In total, Blue Knight rocked violently three times. The first shot made the enemy battleship's barrier unstable, while the second shot took it out altogether. The third destroyed the barrel of the main armament that was just about to fire. Taking down the next cannon in line to fire like that created a gap in its firing pattern, opening the ship to further attacks.

"Go, Theia! Knock 'em deaaad!" Sanae cried.

"Yeah! Anti-ship energy sword, change mode!"

"As you wish, my princess. Changing anti-ship energy sword Signaltin to close combat mode."

Using that opening, Blue Knight closed in on the battleship and thrust forth the massive sword on its right arm. With over two million tons of mass moving at high speed behind that thrust, Theia pierced through the battleship's armor like it was paper. She'd lodged the tip of the sword in the ship exactly where she was aiming: the battleship's main computer in charge of controlling the entire ship. With that down, the Imperial Army battleship fell silent.

"All right!"

Following the destroyer, Theia had now incapacitated the battleship. The only enemies left on the field were the three ships in combat with her allies. At that point, Theia was convinced of her victory.

"This is bad, Your Highness! I've detected enemy ships on the gravitational wave radar! Another eight ships have appeared and they have us surrounded!"

"What?!"

"They seem to be stealth ships that had their generators powered down!"

"We've been had!"

In spite of all her confidence, the situation didn't unfold like Theia expected. The battle in a region only Blue Knight could reach turned out to be a ruse de guerre to lure out Theia and the others. The Imperial Army

had observed the movements of the Reborn Forthorthian Army and picked a fleet in a convenient location to attack. Theia had walked—charged, even—right into their trap.

If Kiriha were here, this wouldn't have happened. This is my fault!

In that moment, Theia bitterly regretted Kiriha's absence. If she had been there, they probably wouldn't have fallen prey to such trickery. The same could be said if she had just heeded the AI's warning. In other words, Theia's headstrong nature and confidence in her abilities had brought crisis upon them. Even so, it seemed cruel to blame her for it. She and everyone else aboard the ship were still shaken from the sudden disappearance of their friends.

"But we can't just let them gang up on us! Contact the allied fleet and reconstruct the formation!"

"Theia-chan, Uncle and I will go out! My weight won't matter if we die here!"

"I'm counting on you then!"

"Your Highness, I'm reading high energy reactions from the entire enemy fleet! Lock-on detected! They're attacking!"

"I'm counting on you too, Sanae! Since Yurika's used up all of her mana, you're all we've got left!"

"Yeah! Leave it to me!"

At first there had been six Imperial Army ships, and now another eight had appeared. Theia had taken out three, but that sill left them with eleven enemy ships to handle. In contrast, Theia and the allied fleet had five ships between them. Even taking into consideration that Blue Knight was stronger than a standard battleship, they were clashing against a force more than twice their size. Theia genuinely wondering if she could overcome such a desperate situation on talent alone, but she chose to put her concerns aside and concentrate fully on the battle ahead.

"All ships, take defensive measures!"

"Incoming bombardment!"

All together, each of the enemy ships opened fire. Between the eight new ships that had joined the battle and the three that were already in combat, lasers and beams flew through space like a hail of shooting stars.

“Theia!”

“Yes!”

Theia used Sanae’s spirit sight to weave her way through the volley of incoming fire. And with the aid of the illusions still in effect from Yurika’s spell, Blue Knight only took a few hits. If they’d hit all at once, it still would have been bad. But fortunately, the hits were more sporadic than that and the barrier was able to block them all. Sadly, the same wasn’t the case for the four allied ships.

“The defense ship’s wide area distortion field has shut down due to overload! Twenty-four seconds until its function is restored! The destroyer has taken moderate damage, the carrier has taken minor damage, and the battleship has taken minimal damage!”

Defense ships had the power to disrupt electromagnetic waves and gravitational waves, as well as use barriers and other devices to protect friendly ships from enemy attacks. But even with its defensive capabilities, it wasn’t enough to stand up to that many ships at once. It may have been a different story in a country where the native technology was inferior to theirs, but here they were fighting against other Forthorthian ships and had no such advantage.

“Send the fighters to the front and let the others know to follow us!”

“But then Blue Knight will draw all the fire!”

“If we don’t do it, we’ll all be wiped out anyway! This is the only way for us to win!”

With their allies already having sustained damage, they wouldn’t stand a chance if they fought normally. They needed to try something else, no matter what the dangers of it might be. In this case, Theia decided to place her bets on close combat with Blue Knight. The closer they got, the harder it would be for the enemy ships to use their bombardment tactics. While closing in on the enemy was taking a huge risk, it was a chance they had to take if they wanted to win.

We have to avoid capture no matter what. I'd just be a hindrance to mother... Worst case scenario, I can let Sanae and the others escape while I stay behind...

Although Theia was still bravely issuing orders, she was mentally preparing herself for defeat. Even she could see the writing on the wall at this point. However, just before Theia charged ahead, something unexpected happened.

Beep, beep, beep!

"Confirming a light signal! The Imperial Army has ceased their attack and is falling back!"

"What?!"

Three large balls of light were launched from the bigger battleship assumed to be the Imperial Army flagship. They were vividly colored red, blue, and yellow. It was the traditional signal for requesting a ceasefire.

"Why would they call for a ceasefire now?! They have the upper hand!"

If the Imperial Army pressed on for just a bit longer, chances were that they would defeat Theia and seize victory. Despite that, they had backed off. Since killing or capturing Theia would make great strides towards victory in the war, not just this battle, there seemed no possible way that Vandarion's troops would back down. And yet, nevertheless, that's exactly what they'd done. Theia was awestruck.

"Your Highness, I've discovered the reason! A meeting of the royal families is calling for a ceasefire throughout all of Forthorthe!"

"A royal family meeting?! But Vandarion wouldn't back down over that!"

A royal family meeting held powerful sway over Forthorthe's royalty. As title and authority could be stripped from any royal—including the empress, as was evidenced by what had happened to Elfaria—there were consequences for not abiding certain conventions. However, such a threat didn't affect citizens without royal authority. Vandarion certainly had no reason to play by the rules in that regard.

“Wait, Your Highness! There’s a reason! It’s not just the royal families! The ceasefire was universally proclaimed by the regent empress, Ceilēshu! Even Vandarion had to pull back in order to avoid being labeled a traitor!”

“Did you say regent empress?!”

A ceasefire called for by the royal families was one thing, but a ceasefire decreed by a regent empress was another story altogether. Regent or not, the empress held the highest authority over Forthorthe and its people. Those who defied her would be branded traitors, and in order to avoid that, even Vandarion had backed off.

The Name Is Ceilēshu

Friday, December 17th

One week after the ceasefire had been called for under Regent Empress Ceilēshu’s rule, the royal families held a grand press conference. The conference was filled with representatives from all kinds of media, from reporters of well known newspapers to independent journalists. There were so many people there that not all of them could fit in the conference hall of the biggest hotel in Forthorthe’s capital, Fornorn. The journalists who couldn’t fit in the hall and the citizens who had gathered for the occasion simply surrounded the hotel, making the royal families’ press conference a much bigger affair than usual.

The reason for the abnormal excitement was a statement that had been released to the media prior to the press conference. The statement was regarding the election of the regent empress and the details surrounding it, but it also indicated that there would be an announcement from Lord Koutarou Satomi, the knight in blue armor who was traveling with the Reborn Forthorthian Army. The people interpreted this to mean that the imperial household would be officially recognizing Koutarou in some way.

Of course, if the announcement were something negative, it wouldn’t be presented during the regent empress’s press conference. If the royal families were to make an announcement like that, it would have been a press release instead. Because of that, it seemed clear to the public that the

announcement was going to be a positive one. Hoping that it would be exactly what they thought it might, the media and citizens alike flooded the hotel.

“To all those in attendance, the royal family meeting’s press conference will now begin.”

Serving as the coordinator for the press conference was the same man that had presided as the chairman of the royal family meeting, late Empress Dilumiora’s spouse, Lord Karlstoff. While he was an elderly gentleman almost eighty years old, his behavior and voice still maintained a powerful presence. Because of that, when he spoke through the speakers to the conference hall, all fell silent.

“While this conference is in regards to the official announcement of Her Highness Ceilēshu being elected regent empress, there is something that must be announced before that.”

But the hall didn’t remain silent for long. Once Lord Karlstoff mentioned the announcement they’d all been waiting for, the venue was abuzz and cameras were going off left and right. Lord Karlstoff had to wait patiently for the commotion to die down.

“I am speaking of an announcement in regards to the knight in blue armor traveling with the Reborn Forthorthian Army.”

The hall was abuzz once more. The long-awaited truth would finally be revealed. The anticipation was only building with each passing second.

“His birth and status have been kept hidden as he himself and Princess Theiamillis believed that it would be better not to reveal such information. Because of that, there has been a great deal of conjecture on the matter flying around. At the royal family meeting, we consulted him and asked if he might disclose these details to us as we are now in a situation where this holds great sway over public opinion.”

The buzz in the hall gradually died down. However, that wasn’t because the people present had lost interest. It was simply because nobody wanted to miss what was Lord Karlstoff was about to say.

“As a result, he has taken our side and revealed this information to us under the condition that we treat it with utmost care.”

Lord Karlstoff stopped speaking for a moment and picked up a water bottle from the desk. His throat had dried up from the pressure of making such an announcement. After drinking the water and wetting his parched throat, Lord Karlstoff continued.

“However, what he shared with us far surpassed what we could have imagined. That is why he kept it a secret for so long, and I understand how he feels. However, that is exactly why we were unable to keep such truth a secret any longer. It is far too important to the citizens of Forthorthe.”

Lord Karlstoff didn’t falter, but serious tension could be heard in his frank voice.

“With all of that in mind, citizens, please listen calmly. This boy is neither the descendant of nor successor to the Blue Knight as we had suspected.”

Lord Karlstoff knew what he was about to say would shake all of Forthorthe.

“He is none other than the Blue Knight himself.”

And he was right. In that moment, the very foundations of the massive nation spanning the galaxy, the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, were thoroughly shaken.

After the identity of the knight in blue armor was revealed, it took more than fifteen minutes for the conference hall to calm down again. The hall had fallen into tumult with people running outside to tell others what they had just heard, people running inside of the venue in their stead, and people trying to run up to Lord Karlstoff but being stopped by police. It was so bad that Lord Karlstoff had to leave the hall and wait for the commotion to die down.

Once the press conference restarted, Lord Karlstoff began going through the details on how exactly they’d come to determine that the person in question was actually the Blue Knight. The most impressive evidence of all was the large amount of data that the second princess, Clariossa, had submitted. Her own recordings on top of video records and operational data from the armor were very convincing. The sheer amount of data she had on the matter was so staggering that it would have been impossible to fake it all without any sort of obvious discrepancy. Moreover, that it had

come from a princess of the Schweiger family, known to be on bad terms with the Mastir family, was rather compelling.

And after taking all of the submitted data into account, a genetic investigation was performed. In it, traces of gene manipulation were found in many of the citizens of Forthorthe, and the genes that had been manipulated largely matched those of the knight in question. With that, there was plenty of backing to support the princess's data.

They had also questioned the knight himself. He knew things not even the royal families did, so archaeologists and historians had come together in an effort to confirm whether or not what he was saying was the truth. They hadn't been able to determine much, and there were notable discrepancies with certain history books. His story, however, perfectly matched up with Princess Alaia's memoirs and military records from the time. It also seemed to answer some long-held questions the archeologists and historians had on the matter.

A thorough investigation was also performed on the articles that Princess Clariossa submitted. The results of their examination through various archaeological techniques confirmed that they were all real. Everything from the materials to their production methods was exactly the same as what had been used during that time period, and moreover, it was even believed that it would be impossible to replicate those with modern means. However, the decisive pieces of evidence were the wooden insignia on the armor's breastplate and the silver sword the knight carried.

DNA was found and collected from the wooden insignia. Genetically, it indicated that it belonged to royalty, and a comparison with an imperfect sample showed that it was very likely Princess Charl's. As for the silver sword, they went to a stand for it hidden in a temple in the mountains of Raustor and compared the silver fragments they found there to his silver sword. Of course, the raw material had corroded some over the centuries, but by calculating backwards, they could tell that the samples were very similar. Moreover, the knight had been the one to tell them where this stand was. Not even the royal families had known about it, and based on the fact that the stand hadn't been touched for at least several hundred years, the chances were high that the silver sword was the real Signaltin, which only further served to prove the knight's identity.

In addition, all kinds of other investigations were carried out. But all the results that came in seemed to corroborate the knight's story. Faced with a mounting pile of evidence, even skeptics were forced to admit the knight in question was indeed the real Blue Knight. That also meant acknowledging that he had traveled to the past by accident.

Granted, there was still the possibility that all of this was purely by luck or coincidence. It just seemed so unbelievably unlikely. Even though the odds were non-zero, they were still astronomical. It was far more realistic that this boy was indeed the Blue Knight.

As the news from the press conference made its way throughout Forthorthe, it put the whole nation in a stir. The one they had been waiting for had finally returned. And he was fighting for the country, its citizens, and the royal families once again. It was a much needed balm to the war-weary hearts of the citizens of Forthorthe. It gave them hope. Hope that peaceful times would return once more.

"Well now this is a commotion... I suppose what's done is done, but to think it would cause this much of a fuss..."

Elexis switched between holograms while muttering to himself in admiration and surprise. He was currently in the VIP room of the hotel where the press conference was taking place and looking at various information using his computer. The town was overflowing with people and everyone was cheering. Regardless of the channel, all news stations were billing the Blue Knight's return as their top story, then running specials on it after their regular news programs. It was as if all kinds of festivals and holidays had started up at once, and the joyous atmosphere spreading through the nation made it hard to believe they were in the middle of a civil war.

"But I know how they feel. I almost fainted when I heard about your identity myself, Koutarou-kun."

Elexis sat down in his chair, looking away from the holograms and towards the sofa and the armchair in the room. Sitting in the sofa were Clan and Kiriha while Koutarou was in the armchair. Behind him was Maki, sticking to him like a shadow. Hearing what Elexis said, Koutarou looked at him with surprise.

“Hadn’t you already realized it?”

“I didn’t think there was any doubt that you had the Blue Knight’s powers, but I never imagined that you were the Blue Knight himself. It’s been two thousand years since then, after all. At best I figured you were a descendant or successor, or perhaps both. I have common sense, you know.”

Elexis had been as surprised as anyone when Koutarou told him the truth of his identity. Of course as a veteran businessman, he didn’t let it show. He’d been able to keep a straight face at the time because he hadn’t been presented with all the research the royal families would do in order to confirm it. He wasn’t truly shocked until he saw all of the evidence that was collected. It was enough to make him question his own sanity, and he had to drink several shots of strong liquor to calm himself down. While he had fought against Koutarou many times before, Elexis was a Forthorthian too.

“If you ask me, I’m surprised Maya’s reaction was so tame. Folsarians were exiled by you, weren’t they?”

“That was several hundred years ago, and it was their fault for losing.”

Maya was standing behind Elexis. Like Maki, she was protecting the person in front of her. The presence of the two girls and their defensive postures indicated that Koutarou and Elexis didn’t fully trust one another.

“Now that you mention it, Darkness Rainbow is full of people like that. There are only a few still working towards the original goal, no?”

“The country is at stake. I’m not childish enough to start a commotion for no reason. Of course I can’t speak for Crimson.”

Maya looked like she was enjoying herself. Things were proceeding through bargaining and scheming, just the way she liked it. And victory was within reach. Besides, she had known for a long time that Koutarou had the Blue Knight’s powers, so the news didn’t take her by surprise. In fact, she wasn’t acting much different now than she usually did.

“Being able to get all the way to the capital right away was largely due to Princess Clariossa. And for that, you have my thanks, Your Highness.”

Elexis elegantly thanked Clan in a high-class fashion. It was true that Clan had played the most important role in all of this. Not only had she provided evidence of Koutarou's identity, she had also provided a point of contact with the royal families as a member of the Schweiger family. Since it meant taking away power from the Mastir family, the Schweiger family was more than happy to help. They had told the other royal families about Koutarou and used their influence to suggest the appointment of a regent empress. Ever since then, Clan had been given the duty of being the Schweiger family's liaison with the Blue Knight. With that, she was officially acknowledged by her family as the Blue Knight's partner. She was even praised for bringing the Blue Knight over from the Mastir family.

"Who would believe thanks from a man who's planning to end the imperial government?"

Of course, Clan herself wasn't very happy about Elexis. She believed that preying on their weakness to manipulate them into this alliance was extremely unbecoming of leader. To Clan, Elexis was exactly the kind of man she couldn't stand.

"But I am sincere, Your Highness. At the very least until our ceasefire ends."

"I'll stay quiet until then too. Pointless fighting will only benefit Vandarion, after all."

"A wise judgement, Your Highness."

But despite her personal feelings, Clan understood their current situation. It was important for her to play nice and keep up their relationship with Elexis as long as their real enemy, Vandarion, was still in power.

"Koutarou, it's almost time," Kiriha spoke up.

"Jeez... I wish I could've just stayed behind the scenes."

At Kiriha's urging, Koutarou stood up from his seat. He had an important job coming up. Taking the three girls with him, Koutarou headed towards the entrance to the room.

“Oh, we can’t have that. You’re the star of today’s show, Koutarou-kun. Make sure you properly escort Princess Ceilēshu.”

“I know. You just keep your side of the bargain.”

“The safety of Her Majesty Elfaria and Her Highness Theiamillis, right? Just leave that to me. I always oblige my contracts.”

“Then that’s fine. But man, this all sure has gotten troublesome...”

Koutarou was now headed to the conference hall in order to take part in a question and answer session with the press. He was specifically supposed to show his support of Princess Ceilēshu as regent empress. In order to do that, Koutarou had to announce that he was the Blue Knight. With the influence he would gain by admitting that, he could help convince the public that Ceilēshu was the right choice. And in exchange for doing all that, Elexis would make sure Elfaria and Theia were safe.

The first princess, Ceilēshu, was tall compared to Theia, but it was to be expected since she was older. In Earth years, she would be around twenty years old. She was practically an adult compared to the young Theia, and the difference in height seemed to highlight that.

“Layous-sama, I look forward to working with you today.”

“Same here, Princess Ceilēshu.”

The biggest difference by far between Theia and Ceilēshu was their personalities. Ceilēshu was quite different from what Koutarou had come to expect of Forthorthian royalty. The empress and the princesses he knew were all openly strong-willed people. Theia was on the top of that list. In contrast, Ceilēshu practically emanated gentleness. She was very similar to Alaia in that sense, but even Alaia had had a great deal of strength underneath it all. Ceilēshu was lacking that. Rather than seeming to be from a family of warriors or knights, she seemed more like someone from a family of scholars or priests.

I bet Elexis figured that would make her easy to control...

That’s what Koutarou felt as he looked at Ceilēshu. What Elexis needed was a puppet until he could edge out Elfaria and Vandarion, not a real leader that could make decisions on their own.

“By the way, may I ask you a question, Layous-sama?”

“Ask me anything, Your Highness.”

Koutarou and Ceilēshu were headed to the conference hall together, but Koutarou walked half a step behind her as a knight. Because of that, he couldn’t see the expression on her face.

“You are Layous-sama, are you not?”

“After everything, yes.”

Koutarou gave Ceilēshu a casual answer. Her gentle demeanor seemed to encourage it. Her question was also an abstract one, and Koutarou didn’t think it was very meaningful.

“And are you still Layous-sama even now?”

However, her follow-up question made Koutarou reevaluate his opinion of her.

She might not be exactly as she seems...

This time, Ceilēshu’s question clearly had special meaning behind it. To Koutarou, it sounded like she was asking if he was still living as the Blue Knight.

“Living like this is a way to show my sincerity, good will, and gratitude to the people I lived and fought alongside... No, that’s not it...”

Koutarou earnestly searched for words as he tried to convey his vague feelings. He felt like he couldn’t give her such a casual answer this time.

“Living with my head held high as the Blue Knight is sort of my own chivalry.”

“I see. That’s a wonderful aspiration.”

As Ceilēshu said that, she stopped and turned to Koutarou. She had a very beautiful and gentle smile, yet it also looked sad.

“One more question. How did Theia-chan... How did Princess Theiamillis grasp your heart?”

But the sadness in her smile quickly vanished. She was simply smiling gently now just as she had when she and Koutarou first met.

“I don’t really know myself. After all, she tried to kill me at first.”

Even when asked why he became Theia’s vassal, Koutarou couldn’t give a clear, specific answer. Maybe because he never had one to begin with. He just simply couldn’t leave Theia be when she was troubled.

“Heehee, do you even realize, Layous-sama?”

Ceilēshu held her hand over her mouth in ladylike fashion as she giggled and cocked her head to the side. She was still quite visibly smiling.

“Huh?”

“That is the same as saying that you love everything about her.”

Not having a specific reason meant that everything was a reason. That was absolute loyalty, or perhaps... Ceilēshu couldn’t help but smile.

“Your Highness...”

“Let’s go, Layous-sama. We have to protect Forthorthe.”

When Ceilēshu said that, she revealed an expression Koutarou was familiar with.

There really is more to her than meets the eye.

It was the expression of a princess determined to fight.

Once in the conference hall, Ceilēshu boldly spoke to all of the citizens through the cameras without flinching. It was quite different from the mild air she’d had about her before. She now truly looked and sounded like a leader worthy of guiding Forthorthe.

“I am Ceilēshu. First off, I would like to report to all citizens that I, Ceilēshu Kua Forthorthe, have been appointed regent empress.”

Ceilēshu then began going through her qualifications and why she’d been chosen for the job.

Forthorthe was currently without an empress. The former empress, Elfaria, had been stripped of her royal authority. And since someone without royal authority couldn't be empress, Elfaria had subsequently lost her right to the throne. Following those events, a conference was held to decide what to do, and it was ultimately determined that parliament would take things over as they were.

But things hadn't worked out as planned. With parliament in control, everything needed to be decided during conferences with the entire parliament assembled, meaning decisions took longer to reach and the original role of the parliament as a legislative body was stagnating. If things continued as they were, a political void would open and the entire country would decay from the top down. In order to avoid that, a regent empress had been chosen.

Of course, since it was an emergency measure, the throne had not actually been abdicated. These measures were normally only taken during extreme, unexpected situations such as the empress falling ill, and it was customary to go in the order of greatest claim to the throne. That's why Ceilēshu was chosen, and why she had become regent empress rather than empress. This was out of deference for the possibility that the charges brought against Elfaria proved to be false. In that scenario, she'd need to reclaim the throne or the validity of the monarchy would be lost. Inversely, if Elfaria was found guilty, she would be forced to abdicate, and another empress would ascend the throne in accordance to the ancient customs.

"Of course, the royal families and I know that this is not the best option. However, since a better option can't be determined at this time, we are confident that we have adopted the best plan in this situation. I'm sure there are many citizens who are not convinced of this, but this is only a temporary solution until things are fully resolved. And to that end, I ask for your cooperation."

Ceilēshu's speech was splendid. Not only had she honestly acknowledged what she could and couldn't do, did and didn't know, she was also gracious enough to ask the people of Forthorthe for their help in resolving the situation. She was the ideal leader to those who had been unable to choose between Elfaria and the military thus far.

"And I would like to once again make my wishes clear. The Imperial Army of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire and the Reborn Forthorthian

Army are to stop combat immediately. This is an official order from the regent empress."

After finishing explaining the details, Ceilēshu demanded an end to all combat with her authority as empress. The empress was originally the commander-in-chief of the Imperial Army, but parliament had accepted Vandarion's leadership in the absence of an empress. But now a new, albeit temporary, empress had appeared. If Vandarion defied her, he would become a traitor and the Imperial Army would become a coup d'etat army. All fighting had to be stopped. And since the Reborn Forthorthian Army was only fighting to stop Vandarion's violent actions, they had no reason to continue if the Imperial Army ceased all hostile actions.

"Moreover, the military that denounced Her Majesty Elfaria due to suspicions of criminal activity are to immediately submit the evidence they made their decision on. It will need to be examined for validity before the trial."

Next, Ceilēshu demanded that Vandarion's side submit the evidence they had so far withheld. Up until now, they had claimed that they feared that Elfaria's side would tamper with it if they released it, but Ceilēshu was an impartial third party to the whole affair. And since she was serving as empress by proxy, it would be hard for Vandarion to reject her request. If he refused, he would lose his credibility.

"Additionally, to ensure a fair trial, a special court will be prepared with a newly appointed judge and staff."

The empress had the right to appoint judges, especially those for high-ranking courts. As things were, there were accusations that a normal trial would be biased. It was rumored that the judges and other court staff were being bribed or threated by Vandarion. And for those reasons, a courtroom shake-up was required for a fair trial.

"The trial will be held as soon as the evidence has been examined and the judge and related staff have been appointed. I request that Her Majesty be present at court for this trial."

Ceilēshu also requested that Elfaria obey the law. Even though she believed that the evidence was fabricated, she was clearly evading trial. But once the impartiality of the court was reestablished, Elfaria would no

longer be able to justify that. As such, she would need to comply with Ceilēshu's orders.

"I would like to once again demand that all those involved in this incident swiftly put everything I've asked into action. This is not a request, but a decree from your regent empress."

Ceilēshu's words were, from start to finish, coherent and without contradiction. Only one uncertainty remained, and that was if she and her orders would be respected. If not, Vandarion might refuse her and use public opinion as an excuse. The only reason he had caved to the ceasefire the other day was because he wasn't yet sure if he could get away with defying her or not. Unfortunately, regardless of how in the right she may be, the chances of a third party stepping in so late in the game and still managing to gain traction with the people were low. But the one holding the key to overturning that was the knight in blue armor who appeared on the platform after she had finished her speech.

Once the knight in blue armor, Koutarou, stepped on stage, Theia and the others who had gathered to watch the conference held their breath. It had only been a few days since they last saw him, but it felt like it had been ages since he left. Ruth even had tears forming in her eyes. Immediately after making his appearance, Koutarou was bombarded with questions from the journalists.

"Um... Layous-sama, may we call you Layous-sama?"

"Is that your question?"

"I-It's not, but... this is a special situation for us, and we wouldn't want to risk offending you."

"You may call me whatever you like. Her Majesty Alaia would call me Layous on formal occasions, Blue Knight during war councils, and Koutarou privately."

"Then since this is a formal occasion, I shall follow Her Majesty Alaia's example and call you Layous-sama."

LIVE

Some anxiety could be seen in Koutarou's expression, but it didn't hold a candle to the journalists who were asking him questions. Standing before a legend, some of them were nervous wrecks. The same was true for the citizens watching. The entirety of Forthorthe was rapt.

"The first thing I would like to ask about is under what circumstances you ended up time slipping two thousand years into the past."

"The cause of that was an unexpected accident. I was caught up in a space-time device being developed by Princess Clariossa that was running out of control."

"So it wasn't by choice?"

"That's right. Besides, traveling to the past isn't something you can will yourself to do. And even if you could, wouldn't you aim for something closer to present day? That would reduce the risks if you were unable to return. What about you? Would you be willing to travel to the distant past?"

"No, I think I would choose something more modern, just as you say, Layous-sama. Also, in regards to your return... I hear you were buried underground for two thousand years."

"That would be Veltlion's special territory. Thanks to Her Majesty Alaia declaring it inviolable domain, we were able to safely return. I believe you will still find traces if you investigate there."

Koutarou honestly answered the journalists' questions. Though he held back some of the truth when it came to Theia and Clan, he technically didn't tell a single lie. And as such, one remarkable thing after another left his mouth. Each time, some of the journalists in the conference hall would dash out to immediately go try and find evidence to corroborate what he'd said.

"I'm Galesbarn of *The Forthorthe Periodical.* Layous-sama, you've been supporting Her Majesty Elfaria up until now, but do you intend to now support Princess Ceilēshu?"

"In terms of who I do and do not support, I am still supporting Her Majesty Elfaria. Since Her Majesty is from the Mastir family that I am indebted to, I hope you can understand. But when trying to maximize the

advantages to both the Mastir family and the citizens of Forthorthe, I have decided that it would be best for Princess Ceilēshu to become regent empress in order to get the situation under control."

"So you're saying that if a fair trial is held, there won't be any point in continuing the civil war?"

"That's right. My standpoint is the same as Her Majesty Alaia's was. We shouldn't persist with justice if it would force strain and sacrifice onto the citizens. I believe that all royalty should share in that wish. How about it, Princess Ceilēshu?"

"It's just as you say, Layous-sama."

"I still support Her Majesty Elfaria, but in order to restore her position without putting undue burden on the citizens, I support the appointment of Princess Ceilēshu as regent."

As Koutarou's interview with the press continued, the energy in the conference hall only grew more and more excited. The same was true for all of Forthorthe. But in contrast to the euphoria the citizens of Forthorthe were feeling, the girls left behind by Koutarou were confused. And that only got worse the longer the session continued. Their confusion reached its peak when Koutarou clearly stated his support for the appointment of Ceilēshu.

"Wait, what does this mean?! Why is Satomi-san siding with her?!"

Yurika's pained voice rang out in the bridge of Blue Knight. While she wasn't the brightest, even she understood what that meant. This was the result of his secret meeting with Elexis the other day. In other words, Koutarou was siding with Elexis now. And that meant allying with Darkness Rainbow. That was something Yurika couldn't imagine.

"I don't get it either! Koutarou! What are you doing over there ignoring us?!"

Things were simpler in Sanae's case. She was just extremely unhappy that Koutarou hadn't brought them with him. She'd normally be able to understand Koutarou's feelings by looking at his aura, but that kind of spiritual presence wasn't conveyed through the hologram they were watching. Sanae felt both left out and anxious.

“Satomi-kun, if you don’t tell us anything, there’s nothing we can do...”

Shizuka was feeling a pain very similar to when she’d lost her parents. Koutarou hadn’t been the only one that left. Kiriha, Maki, and Clan were gone too. The four of them were like family to Shizuka, and the pain of having them snatched away was immeasurable.

“Your Highness, did Master really not say anything?”

Ruth’s tone of voice remained unchanged, but there were still tears in her eyes. She would do anything for Koutarou’s sake, but thinking that her feelings were for nothing, Ruth was inconsolable. Even more so considering how strongly she felt for him. And so those feelings she couldn’t contain manifested as tears.

“I don’t know... All he said was to trust him...”

Even with Ruth looking to her for an answer, all Theia could do was shrug. There was no doubt that Koutarou believed that his actions were for the sake of Theia, Elfaria, the other girls, and the citizens of Forthorthe. In that sense, things were most likely just as he had said during the question and answers session. However, Theia was very disappointed that the decision had been made without her. As Koutarou’s lord, she wanted him to tell her about important things like this.

“I’m sure it’s because of me... It’s because I collapsed... That’s why Satomi-kun is...”

But of all the girls, the most affected might have been Harumi. She believed that if she hadn’t collapsed, Koutarou might not have made this decision. Without Harumi, Koutarou was still the Blue Knight, just without his power. And that put them all in a dangerous position. Vandarion was launching attacks on the assumption that the Blue Knight was present, but Koutarou could no longer defend them as the Blue Knight could. With the risks for the Reborn Forthorthian Army increasing, further strain would be placed on the citizens. And if Koutarou were to die in battle, things would get ugly very quickly. Harumi believed that Koutarou had chosen to side with Elexis because he couldn’t stand that thought.

She was Koutarou’s Achilles heel and was already on the verge of being cut off. Admitting that was rather weighty for Alaia who existed inside of

Harumi. Thinking that she was standing in the way of Koutarou's chivalry was an unbearable pain for her. Worst of all, Koutarou had taken Signaltin with him, but not Harumi. She believed that was proof enough that she was getting in Koutarou's way.

"What do we do, Theia?! Can we really just let this happen?!"

"Sanae... I..."

"At this rate, he's going to take Koutarou from us! That slime of a man will force Koutarou to work for a low salary for the sake of us and the people of Forthorthe! Are you okay with that?!"

Forced to work... for a low salary...

Sanae's words conjured memories in Theia's mind. While they were on Earth, Theia had given Koutarou his salary as her knight every day. Doing that made her feel like a proper princess, though calling it playing princess would have been equally accurate. But with things as they were, she would no longer be able to do that. Of course, Theia couldn't accept that.

"N-No! I don't want that! I'm Koutarou's master! I won't let him give Koutarou a salary—"

Theia's emotions exploded in an outburst. But in the middle of it, something popped into her head. And the moment it did, she seemed to snap back to herself with a blank expression and her hair now disheveled.

"Salary...?"

It was almost unbelievable, but if it was true, it would clear up Koutarou's so far unexplainable actions.

"I see! So that's what you were thinking, Koutarou!"

Theia's gloomy expression brightened up in an instant. She was now convinced that Koutarou hadn't truly sided with Elexis. That he must be working with Elexis in order to accomplish a greater goal. In reality, there was no evidence that was what Koutarou was really thinking, but it was the only answer that made sense right now. It would also be in character for Koutarou, so Theia was quite sure she was onto something.

“That’s right! Now it makes sense! Why he didn’t tell me anything, why he didn’t take me with him, and why he asked me to put a stupid amount of trust in him... That’s what all of that was about!”

“Your Highness, did you figure something out?!”

“Ruth, prepare to take off immediately!”

“To the rally point? It’s ahead of schedule, but...”

“No, that’s not it! We’re going to pick up Koutarou with Blue Knight!”

Theia ran over to the pilot’s chair and hopped in. As Theia regained her vigor, her confidence began to spread to the other girls. First was Ruth. She was the most sensitive changes in Theia.

“If my suspicion is correct, Koutarou will be faced with his greatest danger yet before long! Let’s hurry!”

“Y-Yes! Calculating a route to Planet Forthorthe!”

Following Theia’s order, Ruth calculated a route to Planet Forthorthe where Koutarou and the others currently were. Ruth still had a serious expression on her face, but what was going on underneath the surface was completely different. Now she was worried about finding the route with the least chance of coming across the enemy in order to save Koutarou from the danger Theia had warned of. It was as if being left behind no longer fazed her in the slightest.

Seeing the two of them spring into action, Sanae and Yurika seemed to lighten up as well. Normally, they were the last ones to catch on, but not this time.

“Sounds like Koutarou came up with a plan.”

“Maybe it was Kiriha-san or Clan-san that came up with it.”

“Ah, yeah. It was definitely one of them.”

The two girls looked at each other and smiled before running to Theia. Even if the details were explained to them, they wouldn’t get it, so it was

enough for them right now just to know that Koutarou had a plan. And that they were going to rescue him.

“Theiamillis-san understands... but I don’t...”

Even though the mood in the bridge had changed, Harumi remained unmoving. Theia had realized Koutarou’s intentions and was preparing to move out. Ruth was assisting her. Sanae and Yurika hadn’t done anything, but they would do more than their share when it came to a fight. Only Harumi had nothing to contribute. She wouldn’t even be able to defend herself when things got dangerous. And worst of all, she couldn’t understand Koutarou like Theia did.

“In the end... I... can’t do...”

What would happen from here on out would happen regardless of Harumi. Nothing had really changed. She was still a hindrance. Even though she might be the reincarnation of Alaia, Harumi was just a powerless girl now.

“Harumi, what’s with that gloomy face? Hold your head high!”

“But I’m just useless...”

Theia was filled with hope and determination while Harumi was afflicted with disappointment and helplessness. Both girls were precious princesses to Koutarou, but they couldn’t have been more opposite in that moment.

“You fool! If Koutarou’s goal is what I think it is, you’re going to be the one that strikes down Elexis’s ambitions!”

“Huh...?”

“So you just wait for your grand reversal with my knight!”

Harumi looked up, guided by Theia’s powerful voice. As she did, she saw Theia leaning forward from the pilot’s seat with a fearless grin. That smile made her want to believe in Theia.

The Blue Knight

Monday, December 20th

A couple of days after the press conference with Ceilēshu and Koutarou, Elexis was back in his office at DKI headquarters in a great mood. The results of the latest public opinion poll had just been delivered. It covered all sorts of topics and issues, but one in particular was of special interest to Elexis.

“This is even better than I expected! Over 50 percent of Forthorthe is in support of Ceilēshu’s appointment as regent empress! Our plan to win over the undecided citizens was a critical success!”

When asked what power the citizens supported, the numbers indicated the highest support for Elfaria. Ceilēshu was second to her, and Vandarion came in last. However, the majority of the population still supported Ceilēshu acting as regent. Looking at the two polls, it was safe to assume now that a fair trial could be held for Elfaria under Ceilēshu’s regency, and that the accusations against her would ultimately be dismissed. To Elexis, that was a near ideal outcome.

“I’m sure this is largely thanks to that boy being the real Blue Knight.”

In contrast to the excited Elexis, Maya’s reaction was rather plain. That was largely because of their difference in personalities, but if someone like Maki, who knew her well, could have seen her in that moment, they would have been shocked. Maya was rejoicing in her own way. Her expression was surprisingly defenseless, and she was drinking more liquor than usual too. Because Maya fundamentally didn’t trust others, it was exceptionally rare for her to behave like this. Drinking in front of other people, much less getting drunk, was out of the question. However, not even Maya herself knew if she was comfortable drinking now because she was so happy or if it was because she was only in front of Elexis.

“Yes. If Koutarou-kun had just been a descendent or successor, things wouldn’t have gone this well.”

It was true that Ceilēshu alone wouldn’t have been enough to accomplish Elexis’s plan. This late in the game, it would have been difficult to bring around the citizens already supporting Elfaria or Vandarion. And without the support of the citizenry behind her, the regent empress wouldn’t have any real power. The Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire was under imperial rule, but it wasn’t the kind of backwards government that ignored the will of its people.

But in order for the people to back Ceilēshu, they would need something to convince them. That was where Koutarou came in. Elexis had hoped that with Forthorthe starting to see Koutarou as the second coming of the Blue Knight, his advocating for Ceilēshu would move them. With the grand reveal of Koutarou's true identity, however, the results were beyond expectation. It was more accurate to say that Elexis had won the jackpot rather than a simple wager. In fact, even in the public opinion poll, support for the Blue Knight was abnormally high.

"The rest will be simple from here," Elexis said with a self-assured smile.

"We'll selectively destroy evidence and make sure Elfaria loses the trial," Maya replied.

"That's right, although... With things as they are now, we might not need to make her lose. As long as some doubt remains, that should be enough. Besides, I made a promise with Koutarou-kun."

Now that Ceilēshu was gaining support as regent empress, as long as Elfaria was forced to abdicate, their original objective would be accomplished. At first, Elexis believed he'd need to get a guilty verdict for Elfaria in order to ensure that. However, after seeing the overwhelming support that Ceilēshu was getting, he no longer thought they'd need to go that far.

"How kind. Whenever it comes to that boy, you're rather indulgent."

"It's not like it's just for Koutarou-kun's sake. In order to stabilize the country and bring the topic of Folsaria to light, I'd rather avoid conflict with Elfaria's faction."

If Elfaria was found guilty, those who supported her would vehemently protest, which would plunge the country into chaos once more. To avoid that, Elexis wanted to settle the trial by having the charges against Elfaria dismissed due to insufficient evidence. While Elfaria wouldn't be found guilty, her innocence wouldn't be proved either. She wouldn't be imprisoned, but she wouldn't be able to reclaim the throne with that kind of lingering doubt about her character. That way, Elexis would technically be keeping his promise to protect Elfaria and Theia while simultaneously getting what he wanted. And if it was the court's decision, those supporting Elfaria would eventually have to come to accept it. Elexis knew

he'd need the support of the people for the return of Folsaria and the abolishment of the imperial government, but with the turnout for Ceilēshu so far, he now thought he could manage that without a guilty verdict for Elfaria.

"So you're concerned about us too?"

"I don't want to get on your bad side after all."

"You talking about this like it's a business deal doesn't please me in the slightest."

"Oh, come now. Must you act like everything I say and do is strictly business?"

"Maybe you should try talking about something other than work for once then."

"My, my... Working with women sure is difficult."

The back and forth between Elexis and Maya was gradually drifting off topic. Things were going so well for them at the moment that they could afford that luxury.

"There's nothing simple in this world."

"I'm starting to get that sense, yes."

"You're talking about me, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't dare. I'm talking about the situation we're in."

"I wonder about that."

As their casual chatter could be heard from outside Elexis's office door, the DKI employee standing in the hall was wondering whether to knock or to come back later.

"Oh, looks like we have a guest," Maya said, turning towards the door.

"Looks like our lovely little tête-à-tête is over for now," Elexis said with a smirk and a sigh.

“I can’t tell if you actually know how to handle women or not...”

When the employee in the hall realized that they knew he was there, he opened the door after knocking lightly.

“Pardon my intrusion.”

“It’s fine. Do come in. Has something happened?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that... but we detected some suspicious activity. We believe someone from Elfaria’s faction was responsible, so I came to inform you of the situation.”

Politely approaching after Elexis welcomed him in, the employee used his portable terminal to project a hologram in the office. It was displaying some records and other data.

“This looks to be access logs from Empire Bank... Is there something wrong with them?”

Empire Bank, or more accurately the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire Bank, was the central bank of Forthorthe. It was the heart of all finance in the nation. Its roles included managing the money of the country, issuing currency, financing general banks, and more.

Of course, as a private enterprise, DKI was normally not privy to records like this from Empire Bank. But through the means of espionage, magic, networking, bribery, and hacking, DKI had access to all kinds of information that should be off limits to them. Nothing, not even law, was going to hold Elexis back from seizing the country.

“Please pay attention to this right here.”

The employee zoomed in on a portion of the massive amounts of numbers and letters being projected. Seeing what he indicated, Elexis crossed his arms and began thinking.

“...An access from the Wenranka territory from ten days ago, huh? An account inquiry using an authorized authentication code... and the account name is ‘Layous Fatra Veltlion’? What is this?”

Normally, the central bank didn't deal with individuals, but nevertheless, here was an account under the name of Layous Fatra Veltlion. That caught Elexis's attention.

"I also had doubts about the Blue Knight having a personal account at Empire Bank, so I looked up it... but it appears to be a dormant account with no balance. I tried going through the logs as far back as I could, but there are no records of the balance moving," the employee explained.

It wouldn't be for several hundred years after Alaia's reign that computers were invented. The banking business was digitalized after that, including records of deposits and withdrawals. But the account in question had a balance of zero even before the banks went digital, so the data that was retrievable now indicated the balance had started at zero and hadn't moved since.

"Which means that its an account that's been left alone for well over a thousand years," Elexis commented.

"I have some employees investigating old handwritten books for information before that," the employee said.

"Well done... So were you able to learn who exactly accessed the account?"

"No, sir. Unfortunately, any trace of the access suddenly disappeared and I was unable to identify the source."

"It was accessed with a regular code, wasn't it?"

"It was, but there seems to have been some advanced hacking involved."

Since the account had been accessed with an access code, nothing seemed unusual about it. But if a normal user had accessed their account that way, the access history and additional information on the login should have been available. However, since none of that could be found, signs pointed to advanced hacking made to look like regular access.

"So was the account data rewritten?" Elexis asked.

"No, that's not possible. I've confirmed with the backups that nothing has been manipulated," the employee responded.

“Which means that someone went to all this trouble just to peek at the Blue Knight’s account?”

“Yes. That’s why I came to report it to you just in case...”

“You did the right thing. Thank you for letting me know. Please continue investigating. I don’t care what it costs.”

“I understand. I’ll put together a project team right away.”

With instructions from Elexis, the employee quickly left the office to get to work. Elexis didn’t so much as look up as he left the room. He was still intently staring at the data projected before him. He was convinced there was something more to this. He had never heard of anyone hacking without a reason or something to gain from it. There had to be something behind it. Elexis’s keen business intuition warned him that if he left that question unanswered, he’d be paying dearly for it later

“What... Just what was the point of doing such a thing? Who was responsible? What was their goal?” Elexis muttered, still staring at the data.

“I think it was the boy and the others,” Maya replied flatly.

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s one part intuition and one part facts. Look at the date.”

“The date?”

“Haven’t you noticed? This date of the access was the day after the conference.”

“What?”

When Maya pointed it out, Elexis saw it for himself. She was right. The account had been accessed the day after he met privately with Koutarou.

“If that’s the case, then that would mean Koutarou-kun had to confirm the account for some reason after our meeting... No, that’s strange. Koutarou-kun had already agreed to work with us, so he would have been able to access it properly if he’d just waited a bit.”

After being recognized by the royal families as the real Blue Knight, Koutarou would certainly have access to his own account at the central bank. He shouldn't need to sneak in through hacking for that. Maya had made a good point, but Elexis didn't agree with her conclusion.

"Then how about this? Only after confirming his account's balance did the boy truly decide he wanted to accept your proposal. In other words, the balance was an important factor in the decision."

"But he accepted our proposal before confirming that the balance was zero."

"Yes, but he must have realized that there was nothing he could do against you once he saw he had nothing to his name here, and he accepted your proposal as the next best thing. Or perhaps it's because the balance was at zero that he thinks he can beat us later on."

Operating under the assumption that Koutarou and the others were the ones who had accessed his account, that seemed the most reasonable conclusion to her. Maya was now a soldier who fought with a mechanical body, but in the past she had been a magician that used mind manipulation magic. Reading other people was still her forte.

"Beat us? How is that?"

But Elexis was predominantly interested in the last bit of what she'd said. Everything else made sense to him, but not that part. Elexis and all of his business savvy just couldn't comprehend how being penniless would put Koutarou at an advantage.

"I can't tell that much. It's just that we can't ignore the possibility. Of course, that only makes sense if it was actually the boy and his friends who accessed the account," Maya said with a shrug.

Her thought process was simply based on knowing how the human mind tended to work. She had no way of knowing if it was actually what Koutarou was thinking. If his first plan was impossible, he'd probably just given up on it and picked the next best thing by working together with Elexis. That's all she thought of it.

"But a chance of defeating us with a balance of zero...?

The motive for accessing the account would depend on whether or not it was Koutarou and his friends. And based on the date, it was very likely that it was them. Elexis still couldn't imagine an empty account being a threat to him, but he couldn't stop thinking about it after Maya had said it. Koutarou was the Blue Knight after all. He didn't think he'd give up a fight that easily.

"For reference, how much money do you think would need to be in his account for the boy to defeat us?" Maya asked.

"Well, in order to defeat us, he'd need to at least match DKI's financial strength, so..."

Humoring Maya, Elexis started on a rough calculation of the massive sum.

Wait, how much?!

As he ran the numbers, a certain thought flashed in Elexis's mind like a warning sign.

"It couldn't be!"

Elexis stopped his calculations and frantically began tapping away on his computer. He brought up a database of the constitution and laws of Forthorthe, then searched through them using "Blue Knight" as a keyword. He also contacted the employee that had stopped by before and asked him about the progress on the handwritten books.

"What is it? Did you figure something out?"

Sensing something was up from the look on Elexis's face, Maya put down her glass and walked over to him. Based on how he was acting, this wasn't anything trivial.

"I don't know yet!"

Elexis thoroughly read the search results he'd gotten. Once he was done with that, he received another report from the employee he'd been in contact with. It was an email with an attached image.

"I see... So that's how it is..."

After looking at the image and rereading the message, Elexis reached a certain conclusion. He was practically at a loss for words, and his face twisted into a bitter grimace.

“We’ve been had! Koutarou-kun and the others— No, perhaps the legendary Empress Alaia herself set up a trap, and we’ve jumped right into it!”

Wham!

Elexis slammed his clenched fist down onto his desk. What he’d just realized far outstripped any scenario he could have imagined. There was danger where he’d never even considered it.

“What do you mean?” Maya asked.

“We, or rather the royal families of Forthorthe, have now recognized Koutarou-kun as the Blue Knight!”

“What of it? Isn’t that a good thing? That’s why the support polls were higher than expected.”

Acknowledging Koutarou as a successor or descendant of the Blue Knight was necessary to garner public approval for Ceilēshu. But because he’d turned out to be the Blue Knight himself, the effect of his endorsement was even more profound than they’d hoped. Maya didn’t think there were any problems with that.

“That is exactly the problem! If he had been a successor or a descendant, this would never have happened!”

Elexis had believed at first that Koutarou was the successor or a descendant of the Blue Knight, perhaps both. That Koutarou was actually the Blue Knight was such an outrageous idea that Elexis had never planned for that possibility. Elexis was a practical man, first and foremost. And in this case, that had worked against him. The possibility he’d overlooked had come back to bite him.

“If Koutarou-kun is the Blue Knight, he’s due a salary!”

The Blue Knight had special rights as decreed by Alaia, and a salary was included in that. So once Koutarou was officially recognized as the Blue

Knight, the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire would need to compensate him accordingly.

“Then why be cheap? Just pay him.”

“It’s two thousand years’ worth of backpay! Not to mention the compound interest on it! Think about it! Even if the annual interest was at 2 percent for five hundred years, that alone increases the amount by twenty thousand times! And in reality, that number is likely much higher!”

Alaia had decreed that the Blue Knight’s salary would be 1 percent of Forthorthe’s military budget, which was 10 percent of Forthorthe’s overall budget. In other words, the Blue Knight was to receive 0.1 percent of the national budget every year.

“And that’s just on the first year’s salary! There are still 1,999 years after that! And every time the national budget has increased, so has his salary! By now it’s far from payable!”

When Alaia had initially decreed it, Forthorthe was just one small country of many on the planet. Because of that, the salary was limited and didn’t exceed that of the most affluent bands of knights at the time. But that amount had increased as Forthorthe expanded. In modern day Forthorthe, 0.1 percent of the national budget was hefty sum.

“As the Blue Knight is granted special rights, he’s tax exempt and his salary won’t be seized due to a dormant account!”

Forthorthe’s ultimate hero, the Blue Knight, was protected by special rights granted to him by Alaia that had been written into law. According to her decree, Koutarou had no obligation to pay taxes and he would receive interest on unpaid salary. His salary also couldn’t be seized because his account was inactive. And the proof that he had never been paid was right there in the bank records. The balance was and always had been zero.

“But the salary has been saved up— Ah,” Maya stopped herself mid-sentence.

“That’s right! It hasn’t! The Blue Knight’s supposed salary was used a long time ago to deal with a disaster and the following famine!”

Three hundred years after the death of Alaia, a terrible disaster befell Forthorthe, the fallout of which had been a terrible famine. The government was short on funds to handle it, so the empress at the time had gone into the money that had been saved as the Blue Knight's salary. Since he hadn't returned for over three hundred years, he was believed to be dead. And as the national hero, the people believed that he would lend them the money in their time of need. Even in the extremely unlikely event he were to return through the use of the supposed powers of immortality granted by Signaltin, they could just repay him then. They had made the decision with everyone's best interest in mind. If the country were to fall into ruin, that money would be meaningless anyway.

"And his salary has never been repaid since then, but he's still entitled to it now that he's returned!"

The following year, after the Blue Knight's property and assets had been requisition to deal with the disaster and famine, it was decided that the savings would stop in favor of paying out all at once should he ever return. And so the Blue Knight's salary was reincorporated into the budget and returned to the treasury. In times of disaster and famine, 0.1 percent of the national budget was a considerable sum and it went a long way in relief efforts. It was the right thing to do. As long as the nation agreed to take responsibility and pay the Blue Knight as promised if the time came, there was no need to dutifully save up money that may never be spent. But there was a miscalculation in that decision.

"It couldn't..."

Realizing it, Maya's face scrunched up.

"That's right! There's two thousand years of interest on that two thousand years of salary! I can't even image what the actual balance due is! The entire national budget wouldn't even be enough to cover the interest!"

Indeed, the real miscalculation was assuming the Blue Knight would never return. Elexis had made the same mistake Forthorthe had, and now after two thousand years, the Blue Knight was actually back.

"That's why Koutarou decided to side with use after confirming that his account balance was at zero, meaning that Forthorthe had no means of paying him! He used us to call a royal family meeting and have him

acknowledged as the real Blue Knight, all so the country would be indebted to him!”

Everything had gone just as Koutarou and the others had planned. With her royal authority stripped, Elfaria was unable to call a royal family meeting herself. It made a certain amount of sense considering she was the one at the center of all the commotion. That’s why Koutarou and the others had used Elexis and DKI in order to call a meeting instead. In order to have Ceilēshu become regent empress and stabilize the country, Koutarou’s identity as the Blue Knight had to be revealed and officially acknowledged. And to keep anyone from finding out what kind of power that would give him, he and the others had planned each step very carefully.

“Right now, Koutarou has become the biggest creditor in history! He could ruin Forthorthe in the blink of an eye!”

Because he hadn’t realized those ulterior motives, Elexis had called the royal family meeting and played right into their hands. That gave Koutarou terrific power in the form of astronomical financial strength that far surpassed what Forthorthe was able to repay.

“You could call that empty account a second Signaltin created by Alaia the Silver Princess!”

The Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire had used up Koutarou’s assets without permission. They had an obligation to repay him. They couldn’t just write off a debt they owed the Blue Knight. And Elexis was right. Not even the entire national budget would be enough to repay the interest they owed Koutarou now. If he chose to cash in on it, it would throw the nation into financial ruin.

“That is the true sword gifted by the divine, the sword of kingship! Forthorthe would become Koutarou-kun’s!”

The only person with the power or the potential to rebuild Forthorthe at that point would be Koutarou, and that would allow him to rebuild the country however he saw fit. In other words, it essentially meant that Koutarou would become emperor. As such, he could reinstate Elfaria if he so desired.

“This was an error on our part! Using Koutarou aside, acknowledging him as the Blue Knight was a big mistake!”

If Koutarou wasn’t the Blue Knight himself, this wouldn’t have gotten so out of hand. The special rights Alaia allowed the Blue Knight made no concessions for his descendants or anyone that took up his title. The salary was limited to him, and once inherited, it would be subject to taxation again. With that in mind, even with the knowledge of his true identity, they never should have formally recognized Koutarou as the Blue Knight.

Of course, this wasn’t something that Alaia had intentionally done. What she’d really wanted to do was properly show her gratitude for Koutarou and amass funds in case of an emergency. That emergency had come much sooner than expected, but it certainly Alaia’s fault Forthorthe had gone all this time without making proper compensation. Koutarou getting this much power, in the grand scheme of things, was merely a coincidence.

“I can’t imagine that boy going that far though,” Maya said and shrugged.

She didn’t think that Koutarou would bleed Forthorthe dry just to gain control and get what he wanted.

“Of course not. He loves Forthorthe. He’ll likely only turn to such measures as a last resort if we continue to put up a fight.”

“If we give Elfaria a fair trial and reveal that the evidence against her was fabricated, he probably won’t do anything at all.”

“Indeed. He wouldn’t do anything to harm Forthorthe and make the citizens suffer. History tells us that much.”

Elexis agreed with Maya’s assessment. Koutarou most likely wouldn’t use his financial strength to such an end. Just because he had a sword didn’t mean he had to use it. It was probably better to keep it sheathed until it was really needed.

“However, if a proper trial is held, the chances of Ceilēshu ascending the throne are incredibly low. We’ll need to come up with some countermeasures for that...”

In order to keep Koutarou from drawing that sword, Elexis would have to see to a fair trial for Elfaria and make sure the evidence against her was

exposed as fake. In that scenario, she would have the charges dismissed against her, meaning her royal authority would be restored and she would automatically reclaim the throne as empress. In order for Ceilēshu to become empress now, she'd need to display incredible aptitude for the job and garner an overwhelming amount of support from the citizenry before Elfaria's trial. Unfortunately, by conventional means, the chances of that happening were meager. That's why Maya believed that some special measures needed to be taken. But Elexis shook his head.

"No. At this rate, the chances of Princess Ceilēshu becoming empress are next to zero."

He had grounds to believe it was realistically impossible for Ceilēshu to become empress at this point.

"What makes you say that? This is just going to reverse the balance of power, isn't it?"

"If that was all it was, it wouldn't have been a problem. The real issue is the one move that Koutarou-kun is certain to make in the future."

"What do you mean?"

"With a mere fragment his vast wealth, he's going to buy up all of DKI's shares. In other words, DKI will become his company."

"Which means you'll be dismissed and DKI will be pulled out of the fight. Then we lose be default, huh..."

In order for Ceilēshu to become empress, DKI would need to make a move. But if Koutarou bought out DKI, they'd be unable to do anything at all. In order to prevent a buyout, DKI stocks would have to be private, but that wasn't the case. DKI was publicly traded, and it was one of the hottest stocks on the market. For the right price, Koutorou could eventually become the largest shareholder of the company and gain a majority stake in it. Forthorthe could also prepare enough money if it was just to buy up DKI. That would cement Elexis and his associates' loss in this race.

"I underestimated the national hero. To think he'd attack with financial strength!"

Wham!

Elexis slammed his fist into his desk again. The young leader of a cutting-edge conglomerate had lost to the legendary hero from two thousand years ago in a game of trickery and economic power. It was an unbelievable development and a great blow to Elexis's pride.

"...So our plan to use the hero and the royalty ended up with us being used by them."

"In this case, there's only one thing left to do! Eliminate Koutarou-kun before he can make his move!"

Elexis and his associates still had one chance to stage a comeback. They only needed to eliminate Koutarou before he could take over the company. Koutarou was waiting for the results of the public opinion poll to make his move. If the citizens weren't supporting Ceilēshu's appointment and the Blue Knight in turn, the buyout wouldn't happen. That's why he was biding his time until now.

The public opinion poll had come out after midnight, and both the stock market and Empire Bank had long since closed for the day. That meant that the soonest Koutarou would be able to make his move would be when Empire Bank opened the following morning. They could stop the buyout by eliminating Koutarou before them.

"Are we going to do that? We'd end up going against the ceasefire."

"What else can we do? Koutarou-kun, the Blue Knight, has already given Princess Ceilēshu his support! We've gotten what we needed out of him!"

It had been decided that the ceasefire between Koutarou and Elexis would last until power was taken from Vandarion. However, Vandarion was just silently waiting in the wings. He already had his forces deployed, and if they waited for him to make the first move, it would be too late. That's why Elexis had to take action now, even if it meant breaking the ceasefire agreement and disgracing himself. He'd been backed into a corner and had no other choice.

The one that noticed Elexis and the others making a move was Clan. Thanks to her experience from the past, she was an expert at enemy surveillance. That said, it was difficult to directly keep watch on DKI

headquarters. DKI had technology so advanced that not even Clan could let her guard down when messing around with them.

Their headquarters was predictably well guarded. That was why Clan had her sights set on their communications instead, surveying the parties the company interacted with and the amount of outgoing traffic. DKI's clients and business partners didn't have defenses on the same level DKI did, so keeping tabs on them was much easier.

Clan was mainly watching over Empire Bank and the public records office. More specifically, she was keeping an eye on access to Koutarou's account at Empire Bank and access to constitution and law databases at the public records office. Someone tapping into both would indicate DKI had caught on.

If that happened, their next move would inevitably be an attack on Koutarou, which meant that the traffic from DKI to the military sector would drastically increase. With DKI's security, it would be difficult to tap directly into a communication line to figure out what was going on, but monitoring the amount of outgoing traffic and where it was going was easy.

Of course, acting on that alone would be rash, so the entrances and exits to DKI headquarters were also being watched with scrutiny. The most important one was the helipad on the roof, which would let them know if either the president's personal aircraft was taken to the military sector or if a military craft landed at DKI. And once she saw the president's personal craft take off and had confirmed the other details, Clan determined that Elexis and his associates were indeed on the move.

"Veltlion, it looks like they're onto us!"

"Jeez, it would have been checkmate if it had just taken them a little longer to figure it out."

"If only. This is the CEO of DKI we're talking about."

Koutarou didn't seem surprised by Clan's report. He had vaguely expected that this would happen, and preparations had been made in advance for that reason. Up until now, Koutarou and the others had tried to stay together as they moved. That's why Maki and Kiriha were also in the

room with them where they were staying. And it wasn't just them. The room had everyone's equipment in it too, all packed up and ready to go. Not thirty seconds after Clan's initial warning, Koutarou and the girls were geared up and ready to escape.

"Clan-dono, how does it look on their end?" Kiriha asked.

Kiriha, who had finished preparations to depart the quickest, slightly pushed the curtain aside to peek outside. Wary of snipers, Kiriha had her haniwas protect her with a barrier, but fortunately she was worried over nothing. Nothing seemed unusual outside the window.

"The military aircrafts haven't taken off, but they're on standby. It doesn't look like they're planning a direct attack on the guesthouse. They're likely waiting for us to move first."

Still something of a sheltered princess, Clan was the last one ready to go, and she answered Kiriha as she was still slowly packing up her computer and the other equipment she'd been using. In the end, Koutarou couldn't stand it and threw it all in her bag for her.

"Even if the situation's bad, it seems like they want to avoid attacking the palace. Though I'm sure it took a lot to hold Crimson back," Maki added.

She had finished her own preparations and was standing next to Koutarou before anyone knew it. With the life she'd lived, she was no stranger to this kind of situation. But even so, she knew that there wasn't any immediate danger right now. With that peace of mind, there was even a smile on her face as she thought of her friend on the other side.

"But if we take too long, the other leaders of Darkness Rainbow will come in on their own. So let's hurry up and get out of here. I definitely wouldn't want to fight Crimson indoors."

Koutarou and the girls were currently in the guesthouse at the royal palace. Elexis and the others should have been aware of that, but they weren't attacking directly. There were lots of risks with attacking the imperial palace, but they might have the leaders of Darkness Rainbow infiltrate if things took too long. Attacking without leaving evidence behind could be considered their specialty. Having to deal with Darkness Rainbow with

just the four of them wasn't desirable, so they made their move to escape before that happened.

The hallway connected to the guesthouse was silent. As it was a place for important people to stay and rest, there wasn't anyone walking around like there would be in a normal hotel. Since it was now past midnight, the only people passing by at this hour were patrolling guards on night duty.

"...Looks like it's still safe," Clan said as she peeked out.

"You're too worried. They're not going to come this fast. It's only been a few minutes," Koutarou chided her.

After that, Koutarou and the girls walked down the quiet, extravagant hallway. The silence was only disturbed by the occasional whisper and the footsteps of the four of them as they moved along. The mood was almost especially somber in such a grand setting.

"I got it, ho! Clan-chan is worried that assassins might have infiltrated beforehand, ho!"

"Th-That's right! That kind of thing happens, doesn't it?!"

"You're just scared, aren't you?"

"Just scared, ho?"

"I am not!"

As the guesthouse at the imperial palace of a massive galactic empire like Forthorthe, the place was huge. Koutarou and the others were headed for the exit, and had avoided the elevators just in case, but even then it took them several minutes to get down the hallway from the room they were using. Confirming they were approaching the door to the outside, Maki turned to Kiriha.

"Kiriha-san, don't you think it's about time we do that thing?"

"Yeah, now's a good time."

Their enemies were DKI and Darkness Rainbow. They would try and plan an ambush with divination magic, but Kiriha had come up with a clever

way to thwart that. She had devised multiple plans and escape routes, and they would choose one at random when the time came so that it would be impossible to predict. To ensure the random element, they would use the trading cards that Kiriha was always carrying with her.

“Aren’t there more than usual today?” Maki asked.

“Since there are so few of us, it’s just in case,” Kiriha replied.

She pulled out about a dozen cards and began shuffling them. She looked like a stage magician with the cards beautifully dancing in her hands.

“Well then, Maki...”

However, when Kiriha spread the cards out and offered them to Maki to choose one, Koutarou stepped in.

“Stop. Leave that for later,” he said with tension both audible in his voice and visible on his face.

“What is it?” Kiriha asked.

“There’s someone in the entrance hall. There’s no hostility in them, but... Clan might actually be right.”

Koutarou could sense the aura of someone just ahead in the entrance hall. That was thanks to the ability given to him by Sanae, and while he wasn’t as good at it as she was, he could sense the emotions of others. In this case, he wasn’t reading an hostility or caution, but unlike the guards they’d encountered, this person wasn’t moving around. They were just silently standing in the hall. If it was an enemy, it was a highly trained expert, so Koutarou and the girls slowly approached with caution. They had considered using a different route, but if it really was an enemy, they didn’t want them getting behind them either.

“How do you do, Layous-sama?”

But it turned out that Koutarou’s fears were for naught. Standing in the hall ahead was only the recently appointed regent empress, Ceilēshu. She gave Koutarou a mild smile as he entered the hall.

“Princess Ceilēshu... What brings you here?”

“That man told me to delay you, Layous-sama.”

The man she spoke of was none other than Elexis. She was standing in the entrance hall because Elexis had told her to, and spread out on either side of her were dozens of unmanned weapons. But even in such a position, Ceilēshu’s smile was unchanging.

“So what are you going to do, Your Highness?”

Koutarou held his ground too and continued speaking as usual. He still didn’t sense any hostility from Ceilēshu.

“This, of course.”

In total there were 32 unmanned weapons in the hall. If all of them activated together, Koutarou and the other girls would be in trouble.

“Destroy one another,” Ceilēshu ordered.

“As you wish, my princess,” the machines responded in unison.

They were quick to follow the order they’d been given. After locking on to each other, the unmanned weapons attacked without mercy. Before long, they were each reduced to scrap. After seeing to that, Ceilēshu approached Koutarou and the others without saying a word. Just as Koutarou sensed, she never had any intentions of hurting them from the very beginning.

“I’ll pray for your fortune, Layous-sama.”

“Why would you side with us, Princess Ceilēshu? That can’t have been easy considering the situation.”

Koutarou was surprised. Since Elexis had been the one responsible for her appointment as regent empress, he wasn’t sure why she’d go against him. Koutarou had even suspected that Elexis had chosen a weak-willed puppet for the position to make it easier to achieve his goals. Odds were Ceilēshu was working together with Elexis either for personal gain or out of personal weakness. Yet she moved out of the way. It was a selfless act of defiance. That struck Koutarou as strange.

“That was the only question I didn’t want to be asked,” Ceilēshu sighed. She had constantly been smiling, but now she looked sad. “I debated the

matter for a long time, whether I should save my father or protect the country...”

“That bastard...”

Koutarou clenched his fist and tried to hold back his anger. He’d known that Ceilēshu’s father was seriously ill. It was information that accompanied the report on her, and it turned out that was her weakness. “Do what I say and I will treat your father’s illness” was the condition that Elexis had given Ceilēshu. Even if it was a feat impossible for medical science, Elexis had spiritual energy technology and magic at his disposal.

“But in the end, I was unable to abandon my father... I decided to listen to that man.”

That’s why Ceilēshu had had no choice but to accept Elexis’s terms. Having lost his mother early in life, Koutarou was painfully aware of how she must have felt. In a sense, Elexis had dangled hope in front of Ceilēshu and used that as a way to manipulate her.

“I was going to obey that man and save my father. That’s what I truly wanted... until the day that I met you.”

But a couple of days before the press conference, when she first met Koutarou, the Blue Knight that saved the country alongside the legendary Princess Alaia, Ceilēshu was seized by a certain thought.

“I am about to sell this man and the country so many people died to protect to a despicable enemy.”

That thought pained Ceilēshu. She wanted to protect the country, but she couldn’t bear the thought of losing her father. Caught in between those two conflicting emotions, she was beside herself. That’s why, on the day of the press conference, she had asked Koutarou a desperate, earnest question: Was he still the Blue Knight? It was only when she heard his answer that she was finally able to find her own path.

“I am still a princess of Forthorthe.”

Ceilēshu couldn’t betray the long history, the culture, or the pride of her country. She couldn’t forget those who had staked their lives to fight for it. Her father was among them. Betraying the country would mean trampling

on what her father's life had stood for. And with that realization, she made her decision. Even if it was painful, Ceilēshu chose to be a princess of Forthorthe.

"No matter what I lose because of it..."

Tears fell down from Ceilēshu's eyes. She knew that the path she was walking meant there was no way to save her father, and that very thought was too much for her. Watching her cry, Koutarou was reminded of Alaia the night of the harvest festival. In that moment, Koutarou was also quite certain of the path ahead of him. There was only one thing he could do.

"Your Highness, I will save your father without fail. I swear on my life and this sword. So please don't lose heart. Wait just a little longer."

This girl who had been given hope voluntarily scorned it for the sake of what was right. And even though she'd done what was right, it plunged her into the depths of despair once more. The pain was likely several times worse than when she'd first learned that her father was dying. And that was what steeled Koutarou's resolve now. He was going to protect this noble princess. He was going to save her, this princess weeping over her own helplessness. No matter how much time passed, Koutarou was still the same.

"Layous-sama... those words alone are salvation to me."

Ceilēshu wiped away her tears and tried her best to smile, but it was no use. Her tears continued to fall and her lips were quivering.

"Please stay safe. Not for my sake, but for the sake of the people of Forthorthe."

"I am not worthy of such words, Your Highness."

Koutarou bowed to Ceilēshu. He was truly angry. The only thing on his mind right now was defeating Elexis. That was how he would save Ceilēshu and her father.

"Well then, I must be going."

Raising his head, Koutarou bid farewell to Ceilēshu. The truth was that he wanted to stay a little longer to talk to her, console her, and put her at ease.

But the current situation didn’t allow for that. If he took too long now, everything would be for naught. Koutarou burned the image of teary-eyed Ceilēshu into his mind and ran past her. Knowing what he was thinking, Ceilēshu didn’t say anything as she saw him off.

“We’re going too.”

“Yes. Wait up, Satomi-kun!”

Kiriha and Maki chased after Koutarou. When they both took off, Clan—who was distracted by the crying Ceilēshu—realized that she was being left behind.

Oh no, I have to go too...

Clan started to run past Ceilēshu after the others, but she called out to her.

“Clariossa-san.”

“Wh-What is it?”

Surprised, Clan stopped. Since she’d only just recently started learning how to really relate to and talk to other people, crying wasn’t something Clan was very good at handling.

“How was it that Alaia-sama shook off her hesitation?”

Ceilēshu wiped away her tears once more, this time with more success. Once she’d stopped crying, Clan was somewhat able to recollect herself.

“I don’t know that either,” Clan said, slightly shaking her head with gentle smile on her face. “But there’s one thing I do know for certain.”

“What’s that?”

“Alaia-san loved both Forthorthe and that man. That’s why she was able to do everything she could for them. That is all.”

“Clariossa-san... You’re right. I’ll do everything I can too.”

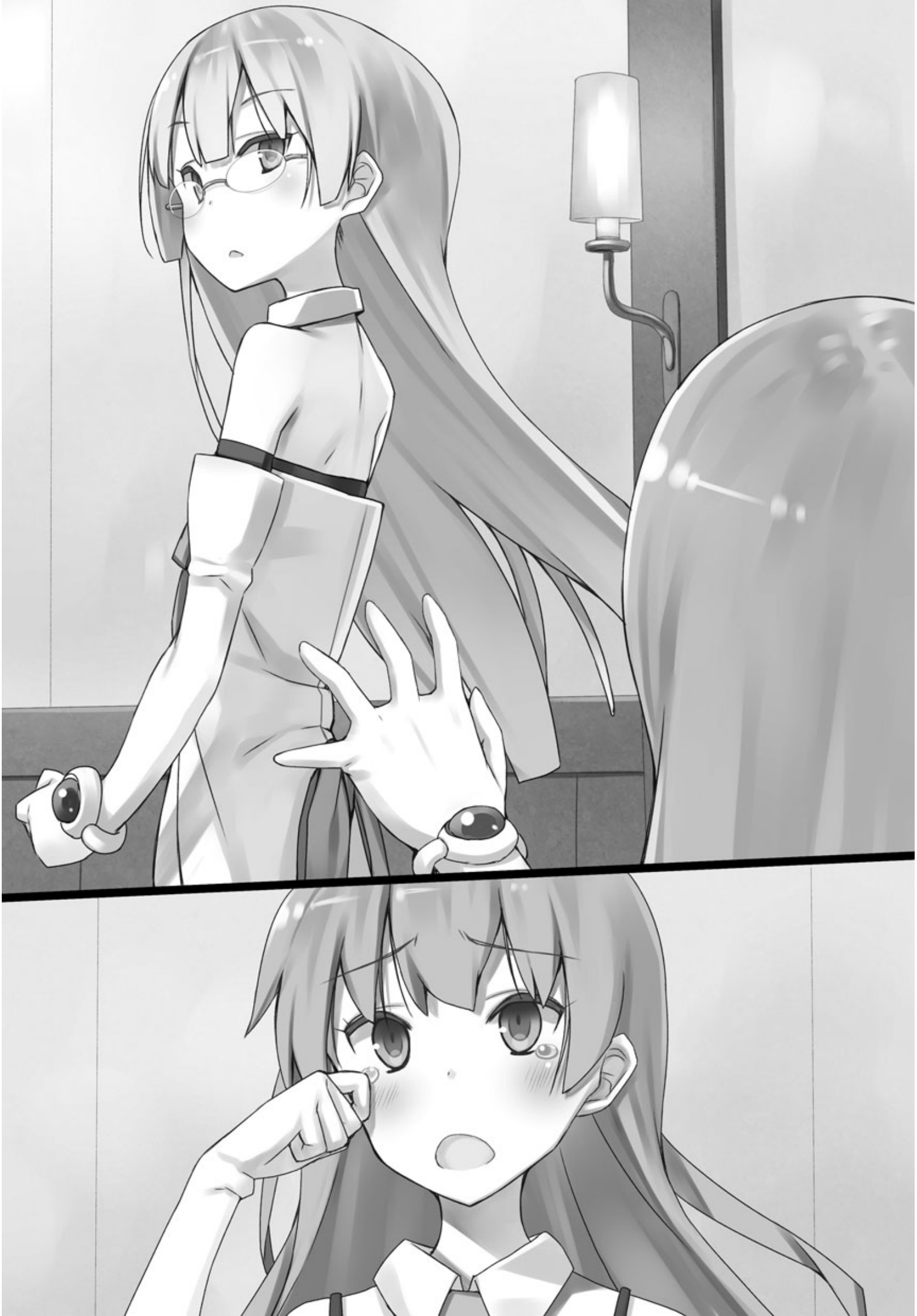
Next, Ceilēshu tried smiling again. Fortunately, she was able to succeed this time too.

“I believe that would be good for you. Now if you’ll excuse me too...”

Relieved that Ceilēshu had regained her smile, Clan hurried to catch up to Koutarou and the others. Her steps were light and without hesitation.

“...I’m really not capable of being empress... How truly unfortunate...”

Clan was running while Ceilēshu was standing still. They were both princesses, but that distinct difference between them made her realize that she wasn’t suited to be empress. Her destiny would be returning the throne to Elfaria.



Koutarou and the others wanted to return to the Hazy Moon, but if they were to use a transfer gate, the gravitational waves created when activating it would be detectable by their enemies. Once that happened, the Hazy Moon's location would be revealed and an enemy fleet would rush to the spot. It wouldn't be a problem if they had an allied fleet protecting them, but the Hazy Moon was currently solo. That meant that they only had two choices: either make a break for the Hazy Moon using the Cradle, or head for the suburbs where gates were commonly used. The former relied on not using gates at all, while the latter relied on blending in so as not to raise suspicion. Regardless of what they chose, they wouldn't be able do either at the imperial palace, so their first real objective was to escape from there.

There were several routes that led to the outside from the guesthouse at the imperial palace. The card that Maki pulled from Kiriha's shuffled and fanned out cards was the Kabutonga Atlas special attack card, which corresponded to getting out of the palace using the drainpipe from the palace pond.

"While this might be an emergency, I can't say I'm happy about damaging the imperial palace as we escape..." Koutarou said, shaking his head.

"If you're the one doing it, no one is going to complain. You practically made it after all," Kiriha replied matter-of-factly.

"Even so..."

Koutarou and the others had infiltrated the pond's drainpipe from the water treatment facility and were currently traveling through the maintenance tunnel. Naturally, there were grates and things along the way every so often to keep people from getting through. Koutarou, at the head of the group, was breaking them down as they came across them.

Slam! Smash!

"But still, why isn't the alarm going off?"

Koutarou tilted his head curiously as he destroyed yet another grate. The grates were there to keep people from infiltrating the palace. When one was destroyed, it should set off an alarm to warn of a possible inbound intruder. But despite that, no matter how many grates Koutarou broke

through, the alarms on the walls weren't going off. The surveillance cameras set up were all on standby too. Thanks to that, Clan was out of a job.

"Thinking about it rationally, Darkness Rainbow must have cut it off."

Maki's thought process was simple. She believed that Darkness Rainbow had silenced the alarm and cut off the surveillance cameras in preparation for their own plans to infiltrate the palace.

"Which means that they're coming from the other side of this drainpipe?"

"Not necessarily the drainpipe. Shutting down the entire system would have been more convenient."

Disabling just the systems along their planned route would indeed be effective, but that kind of focused strategy would take more time and effort. Disabling the entire system was more effective, especially so in situations like this where a small group would be infiltrating in a race against time. That's why Maki figured the chances of encountering Darkness Rainbow in the drainpipe specifically were low.

"...I think it's Ceilēshu-san's doing," Clan said.

Her assessment of the situation was almost the opposite of Maki's. She believed an ally was assisting them.

"Her Highness Ceilēshu?"

"Take a look behind you. Around the grates you destroyed."

Clan stopped walking and pointed behind them. Koutarou turned his head to look.

"...There's nothing there, really."

Nothing looked any different from before, and he didn't see any enemies either.

"Take a closer look. The surveillance cameras are working. You see?"

"Now that you mention it, the lights are on now."

All of the warning systems were deactivated when Koutarou and the girls had passed by them. They'd been able to tell because all the lights on the cameras and alarms were off. But looking back at where they'd come from, the lights were all on now. That indicated the equipment was starting back up again.

"Ceilēshu is most likely at the imperial palace security station, and she's selectively operating the systems just for us."

Clan recalled Ceilēshu's words when they parted. She'd said she'd do everything she could, and Clan was convinced this was Ceilēshu's way of helping out.

"Princess Ceilēshu is an amazing princess, isn't she, Clan?"

Ceilēshu was in a difficult situation. She had sided with Elexis in order to save her father, but now she had betrayed him. It put her in a rather dangerous position. But even then, she was trying to help Koutarou and the others. Koutarou thought rather highly of that.

"You look like you have something else you'd like to say," Clan said with a frown. She was unhappy with his wording and his expression, which was very similar to the one he often had on his face while teasing her.

"Yeah. I'm a little relieved, honestly. Even if I die, there would still be hope."

"..."

However, much to Clan's surprise, the words that came out of his mouth were nothing of the sort. That wasn't at all what she'd expected him to say. And since she'd only been prepared to complain or argue, she had no idea how to respond to him now.

"We can't afford to die, Koutarou. We have plans for the future."

"She's right, Satomi-kun. There's no way you can lose."

After Kiriha and Maki answered in her stead, Clan had finally come up with something to say herself.

"There's no need to worry, Veltlion."

“That’s true. You guys are here after all.”

“Heh, you really are more gentlemanly when you’re incredibly angry.”

Clan knew that when Koutarou was genuinely angry, he became too focused to tease her. In that sense, he was more honest about what he was thinking and his intentions. It did make him seem more gentlemanly. Funnily enough, that’s what it took—being livid—for Koutarou to behave like a gentleman towards Clan.

“Clan...”

“And when you’re angry, you don’t lose to anyone. That’s historical fact.”

Clan had seen Koutarou angry several times before. The first time she saw it, that anger was even directed at her. That’s how she knew that when he was mad, he always came out on top. She also believed that the day would come when Koutarou could tease her freely again.

“...Yeah.”

“Do what you will. We’re here to help you make it happen.”

Koutarou actually felt roughly the same way about Clan. Normally she was selfish and her faults were rather pronounced, but when she was angry, she transformed into a splendid princess. Koutarou could see it happening even now, and he could sense something similar in Kiriha and Maki.

It’s not just Princess Ceilēshu. I’ll make you pay for making these girls feel this way, Elexis...

Of course, Koutarou didn’t want Clan to be a splendid princess. He wanted her to be her usual, somewhat unreliable self. He wanted Kiriha and Maki to be themselves too. And that wish only made him more angry at Elexis.

As it was now after midnight, the group couldn’t tell that they were closing in on the exit to the drainpipe. There only appeared to be darkness ahead. They didn’t even realize they’d made it until Koutarou broke down the last grate.

“Hey, this is the exit, isn’t it?” he asked in surprise.

“So it seems. Now we can finally say goodbye to this cramped place,” Clan replied in relief.

The drainpipe led out into a river with the city on the other side. As they approached the end of the pipe, their view broadened and they could finally see the skyline lit up by skyscrapers.

“So we’ve managed this far without running into Darkness Rainbow,” Koutarou said as he looked out of the pipe.

Between the guesthouse and the end of the drainpipe, they hadn’t encountered a single enemy. They’d been on high alert the entire time waiting for an attack, but they’d reached their first objective rather anticlimactically.

“They likely didn’t want to attack us at the palace anyway,” Kiriha responded. “They’re probably going to come after us once we’ve escaped. There are only but so many places we could go to after leaving here.”

There were more than ten escape routes from the imperial palace, so even if Maya and each of the six leaders of Darkness Rainbow spread out, there’d still be blind spots. If they let Koutarou and the others escape, however, they’d be able to attack as a group. Kiriha’s assumption was that they believed they’d have a much higher chance of success that way.

“Which means that we’re only just getting started...”

Just before stepping out of the pipe, Koutarou stopped. In front of him was a normal nigh-time city scene. But once he took another step, he’d be walking onto a battlefield.

“That would be the case. Karama, Korama, I’m counting on you.”

“Roger that, ho!”

“Leave it to us, ho!”

The two haniwas activated their stealth mode which effectively cloaked them, then headed to the exit. They peeked out of the pipe to get a look at the surroundings.

“We’re in luck, ho! There doesn’t seem to be anyone around, ho!”

The haniwas couldn’t sense any people nearby. With their spiritual energy sensors, they could detect auras just like Sanae did. On top of that, they also had sound, electromagnetic, movement, and infrared sensors, meaning that there was no getting past them other than with magic. They were quite certain there weren’t any people nearby.

“But it looks like we’re being watched from above, ho! It seems we’re very popular, ho!”

Though it wasn’t clear what it was, the haniwas detected something overhead. It was too far away for them to get a good read on it. Even with how advanced they were, the haniwas had their limits.

“I’ll take it from here.”

“Me too.”

If no one was around, it was Clan and Maki’s turn. Clan had far more advanced technology than the haniwas did, so she’d be able to identify what they had detected. Maki also scanned the surroundings with magic, just in case. Together, it would provide them with a much more complete picture of what they were about to get into.

“It looks like it’s small reconnaissance crafts,” Clan announced.

“Are you sure?” Koutarou asked.

“Yes. They’re much like the ones that Pardomshiha uses. They’re barely a meter or so big.”

The sensors in Clan’s bracelet scanned the objects flying overhead. They were small, unmanned reconnaissance crafts. The haniwas had had a hard time discerning them because they were intentionally made out of materials that were hard to detect.

“This is bad. I can sense mana moving around in the sky too. Those reconnaissance crafts probably have spells cast on them.”

Maki frowned as she looked up at the ceiling of the drainpipe. She could feel green magic, the magic of divination, moving around overhead. In other words, the reconnaissance crafts had been magically augmented to help them gather information.

“I see... So that’s why they didn’t infiltrate the imperial palace,” Kiriha mused.

“What do you mean?” Koutarou asked.

“They must be rather confident in those reconnaissance crafts. They think they’ll be able to catch us as long as they have those.”

“So this is bad...”

“Indeed. What to do...?”

Kiriha began strategizing based on the information the others had gathered. If they just jumped out of the drainpipe without a plan, they’d be found within seconds. And since they’d be vastly outnumbered, they wanted to avoid that as long as possible.

In total, there were around twenty unmanned reconnaissance crafts. Fifteen of them were placed along various escape paths out of the imperial palace, while the remaining five were stationed at the blind spots between the others. It was a well made surveillance net. And just as Maki had sensed, they all had spells cast on them meant to gather information. It was the doing of one of the leaders of Darkness Rainbow, Dark Green.

“Hurry up and show yourself, Navy... I’ll kill you for sure this time.”

Green held a personal grudge against Navy—against Maki. Mostly she was jealous of her relationship with Crimson, who was very precious to Green. After Koutarou and company agreed to temporarily cooperate with Elexis, it had given the two of them a lot more chances to see each other, which only fanned the flames of Green’s jealousy. When she learned that the ceasefire had been broken, she was so happy that she could have broken out into a dance.

“Where are you? You can’t hide from my magic!”

That’s why Green was looking for Maki now. The spells cast on the reconnaissance crafts were all to find her. She was using the magically augmented crafts like a radar to detect the mana of cast spells. And since she was magically connected to each of the crafts, it was like she was there in twenty places at once. Now she was just waiting for Maki to use a spell.

After a dozen minutes or so had passed, she finally picked up a reaction.

“I’ve found you! There you are, Navy!”

Out of the twenty reconnaissance crafts, four of them had detected mana. Since casting spells on so many crafts was a lot of work, she had only used a simple spell that let her know the distance to the detected mana. With multiple reactions, however, she could derive the location between them. Four samples was more than enough to do that.

“Maya, give control of the four units that detected the mana to me! Use the rest to chase after Navy!”

“Don’t get so worked up. It’s a waste of your cute face.”

“Just hurry!”

“Okay, okay.”

Following Green’s instructions, sixteen of the reconnaissance crafts then headed towards where the mana was detected. The remaining four maintained their positions so as not to lose track of the target. The mana they were detecting was moving at around ninety meters per minute. It was rather fast for a running speed, but it was no match for the reconnaissance crafts.

Several reconnaissance crafts passed by the drainpipe where Koutarou and the others were still hiding. Seeing how quickly they were moving, Kiriha realized that her gamble had paid off.

“Hmm... just as expected. The spell they’re using can only tell the distance to the mana, and the four slower moving crafts were the first to detect it. That means the other three were at the edge, so this should be the max detection radius.”

Kiriha organized her thoughts out loud as she drew a large circle on the holographic map that Clan was projecting. It indicated the estimated maximum range for the detection spells on the reconnaissance crafts. Now all they had to do was get outside of that circle. Doing that would buy them a considerable amount of time.

“Kii, please let me thoroughly examine your brain one of these days...”

Clan sighed, amazed by Kiriha. The mana that Green had detected was a decoy prepared by Kiriha.

“That would trouble me.”

“It’s not like I’m going to cut you open or anything. Think about it. Without your brain, we’d all be in a world of trouble. Like right now, for example.”

Following Kiriha’s instructions, Clan had prepared a small exploration drone. Maki then cast two spells on it. The first was to conceal mana, and the second was to create an illusion of Koutarou and the others. Once it got far enough away, Maki dismissed the stealth spell from the craft, allowing Green to detect it.

While it was primarily a decoy, it also served as a way to detect what the enemy crafts were really capable of. They weren’t sure that part would actually come to any fruition, but it looked like they’d lucked out after all.

“Even if you say that, this is just to buy time. From here on out, it’s a race against the clock.”

The first four crafts were still spread out, but the other sixteen were closing in on the decoy. If Koutarou and the girls could get outside the range of the remaining four crafts overhead before the others discovered the decoy, Maki would be able to use her magic freely. If they could manage that, it would greatly increase their chances of escaping.

“Let’s hurry, Koutarou,” Kiriha urged.

“Yeah. Let’s go. Clan, want me to give you a piggyback ride?”

“I’m fine! For now, anyway...”

“If you don’t think you can keep up, say so. We’re not messing around here.”

“I know that!”

Koutarou and the others dashed out into the dark of night. It was only a matter of time before Elexis and Darkness Rainbow realized they’d been fooled, and when that happened, all twenty reconnaissance crafts would

come looking for them. Would they make it out of their range in time, or would they be hunted down? They needed both speed and luck on their side now.

Koutarou and the girls were barely able to make it out of the reconnaissance crafts' effective range before being discovered. Thanks to that, Maki was able to cast a disguise spell and another stealth spell to conceal the mana used. With that insurance, the four of them headed for the suburbs. Originally they had planned on going into the forest, but the crafts coming after them had forced them towards the suburbs instead. Their new goal was either the station or the commercial zone where gates were most commonly used in order to get to the Hazy Moon.

"So where do we need to go specifically, Clan?" Koutarou asked as they moved along.

"There are two gates I set up beforehand that are close to here. One at Fornorn Central Station and one at Rushstock Cemetery."

The transfer gate was originally a tool meant for instantaneous travel, but when human lives were involved, it took about an hour to make sure the gate was safely prepared. As a precaution, Clan had prepared twenty such gates around the perimeter of the imperial palace. Fortunately, two of them happened to be near where they'd ended up.

"The fewer people, the better."

"At this hour, that would mean Rushstock Cemetery. It's a famous place so there are probably people there even now, but nothing like the number of people that will be at the station."

"All right, then it's decided."

If they were only concerned about escaping, the central station was the better option. Since it would be full of people, they would have an easier time blending in and an easier time using a gate without raising any suspicion. But as things were, they had no idea what Elexis and his associates would do when they got desperate. In order to avoid casualties, Rushstock Cemetery was they way to go. Rushstock Cemetery did indeed have a graveyard, but it largely served as a memorial park for Forthorthians who had died in war. It was a common sightseeing spot in

Fornorn and it was still open and lit up at night, so there would be people there even at this hour. But compared to the unsleeping central station, it was still the safer bet.

“At Rushstock Cemetery, I’ve set up a gate at the plaza next to the station.”

“So it’s still at a station?”

“That’s usually where gates are, and we needed ours to blend in. The only other option would be a factory that would have a gate in a docking area.”

“Clan, you’re breathing pretty hard. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m still fine.”

“All right, then let’s hurry.”

Koutarou and the girls ran through the city while weaving through the crowds. As expected of the capital of Forthorthe, there were still plenty of people out on the street even after midnight. The traffic put a limit on how fast they could move, leaving them feeling a little anxious and rushed. But after running for a couple of minutes, they started to see stars overhead instead of skyscrapers. They’d reached Rushstock Cemetery.

“Rushstock Cemetery: the resting place for those who fought and died for the country and its citizens.”

The AI in Koutarou’s armor translated the Forthorthian words on the sign, letting him know they’d reached their destination. Rushstock Cemetery was a memorial for those who had fallen in battle.

“Looks like this is the place...”

I wonder if soldiers from back then are here too...

Koutarou was thinking of his comrades-in-arms from two thousand years ago. He had tried his best to keep sacrifices as low as possible, but there were sill many men lost in battle. Thinking about that, Koutarou felt both nostalgia and sadness. And from those rose a strong desire to live and act in a way that would have made his allies proud. They’d given their lives and put their faith in him. With that knowledge, he understood that he had

to live with his head held high as the Blue Knight until the bitter end. Standing in the cemetery reaffirmed that for him.

“Let’s come here again sometime. But right now...”

Right now, he didn’t have time to spend dwelling on his former allies. It was also for their sake that he needed to hurry. If he didn’t, the citizens of Forthorthe they had died to protect would be in danger, and the number of brave men resting here would only increase.

“Satomi-kun,” Maki called to him.

“I know,” he said with a nod.

Koutarou had only stopped for a few seconds, but now he was running with his current allies again. Their destination was the plaza by the station on the cemetery grounds. Their goal was right in front of them.

The cemetery was big, over a kilometer across. The majority of it was a neatly maintained forest with a lake in the center. In the middle of the lake was an island, and on that island was a cenotaph. Koutarou and the others glanced at it as they ran around the east side of the lake.

“It looks like things are going to work out just fine. This is all thanks to you, Aika-san.”

They were almost at the plaza now, and they’d managed to evade both DKI and Darkness Rainbow so far. Maki’s disguise spell was perfect, and despite the reconnaissance crafts circling overhead, they hadn’t noticed Koutarou and the others.

“That’s not true... Besides, we’re not even there yet.”

Maki blushed for a moment but soon snapped out of it. She understood better than anyone that they couldn’t let their guard down yet. The sudden sound of a familiar voice made that all too clear.

“There’s no need to be so modest, Maki.”

“That voice... Maya-sama?!”

The voice coming from the surrounding darkness belonged to Maki's former master and the previous Dark Navy, Maya. If she was around, it meant they'd been discovered by Darkness Rainbow after all.

"Why are you here?!"

Maki's face betrayed her surprise. The bustling capital city of Forthorthe was busy even at night, so picking Koutarou and the others out of a crowd should have been quite a chore. Especially with Maki's magic disguising them. But even so, Darkness Rainbow had found them and caught up to them. Maki was downright shocked.

"You can thank Green and Purple for that," Maya said with a casual smile.

"Thanks to my predictions, we were able to narrow down your location to a few places. But since we didn't have anything decisive to go on, we had to split up," Green said as she stepped from the shadows.

"But that's when the spirits here started to stir, saying that the Blue Knight had returned... so we all rushed over," Purple said as she followed close behind Green.

"I see! Purple is a master of necromancy!" Maki gasped, finally putting everything together.

Because Kiriha introduced a random element to her strategy, it made it difficult for Green's divination to pinpoint her plans. Her readings were blurry, and she could see several futures blending together in them. They also wouldn't be able to find Maki with divination magic until her disguise and concealment spells wore off.

That was where Purple came in. Her specialty was necromancy, which tapped into spirits and spiritual energy. She'd noticed right away when the spirits in the graveyard started to rouse. They could see right through disguise spells, and there was quite a stir over the return of the Blue Knight.

The commotion was in a location that had come up in one of Green's predictions, and Darkness Rainbow was smart enough to put two and two together. Once they had that much information, they regrouped and descended on the cemetery.

“It was truly splendid, Maki. If you hadn’t come here, it would have been a total loss for us.”

“So not bringing Sanae-san with us backfired...”

It was perhaps their only mistake. Koutarou and the haniwas could sense spiritual energy, but they just weren’t as sensitive to it as Sanae was. Even though they’d been able to tell the levels were high in this area, they couldn’t tell why. Cemeteries and sacred places often had high concentrations of spiritual energy anyway, so it was hard to tell anything was strange just from that. Really, it would have been fine if their enemy hadn’t had someone as adept at reading souls as Sanae was on their side.

“Regardless of the reason, we managed to overcome our biggest crisis yet, Koutarou-kun.”

Elexis finally appeared behind the dark magical girls. And it wasn’t just Elexis. He was in his five meter tall robotic giant, so he stood out like a sore thumb even behind the girls. The front of the armor opened up, and Elexis looked down at Koutarou. Koutarou stared right back at him without flinching.

“As expected, things didn’t go as we’d hoped with you guys. If you’d just stayed in the dark for a few more hours, everything would have gone according to plan,” he said in a low voice.

Once morning came, Koutarou and the others would get enough money from Empire Bank to buy out DKI. It would have been an uncontested checkmate, and Koutarou would have been able to declare a decisive victory.

“I admit it was a close call. Who would expect that a legendary hero to attack with financial strength instead of a sword?” Elexis responded.

A fight was a hair’s breadth from breaking out, but Elexis was still chatting away as if meeting with an old friend. It was hard to believe he was here as an enemy. There was no hostility in the way he shrugged his shoulders or the casual expression on his face.

“But would you mind if I ask you something, Koutarou-kun?”

“I’ll answer if it’s actually something I can tell you.”

Koutarou responded to Elexis in an equally calm fashion. Despite how he sounded, however, Clan could tell without even seeing his face that he was suppressing tremendous anger as he spoke.

“Did the legendary Empress Alaia know this would happen?”

“She never said anything about it to me, but she was smart. She must have known there would be trouble down the line after she learned that I got the armor and sword from Theia.”

The meaning of a princess appointing a personal knight and giving him her namesake treasured sword was weighty. With that kind of responsibility on his shoulders, his knightly duties would mean facing serious danger sooner or later. It was hard to imagine that Alaia, a princess herself and one well known for her intellect, wouldn’t have realized that.

“So that’s why she left the salary... In order to allow you to protect Forthorthe, I mean.”

“Though in the end, it didn’t remain.”

“Yet that has given you more power than expected. Forthorthe can no longer disobey you.”

“I have no intention of forcing anyone’s hand.”

“I bet not. Just the same as you didn’t two thousand years ago.”

As the nation’s hero, Koutarou could have married Alaia if he’d really wanted to. But since he’d chosen not to and left, Elexis knew that

Koutarou had no intentions of getting involved in politics or government affairs.

“So how does it feel?” Elexis asked with a smirk.

“What are you talking about?” Koutarou responded with a glare.

“To hold Forthorthe in your hands. To make the country yours.”

“I haven’t done anything like that.”

“But you have. This country is indebted to you in more ways than one now. It can’t do anything against you, its hero and creditor. You’ve basically become its emperor... No, it’s god. That’s why I want to hear it from you. How it feels to be the first person in history to successfully invade Forthorthe!”

More than two thousand years had passed since Alaia’s reign, and in that time, Forthorthe had never been conquered. Koutarou was the first to ever do so, and that’s what had Elexis so curious. He wanted to know what it felt like to take over someone else’s empire.

“It was just a convenient way to protect this country.”

However, Koutarou was still the Blue Knight first and foremost. While he might temporarily keep the power he’d gained in order to assure his victory, he had no intention of freely exercising it. He wasn’t thinking of anything other than protecting Forthorthe. That was what he’d promised he’d do, and it was a promise he’d made to many of those laid to rest in this very cemetery. It was also what Alaia, Theia, and the others wanted.

“You really are an ideal knight, aren’t you? If you so wished, you could rule everything.”

Pssshhh...

Once he had Koutarou’s answer, Elexis closed the front of his armor. Following his lead, Maya and the six magical girls readied their weapons. This would be the end of their conversation and the start of the real battle.

“If you think being some all-powerful god is fun, then you’re mistaken. Ruling everything would mean that there’s nothing left to do. I’m after something much smaller.”

“Honestly, that’s great news to me. If you’re not a god, then I just might be able to defeat you.”

Elexis’s voice through the speaker of his armored mech seemed a little dulled compared to before, but it was actually a sign of him becoming focused rather than losing interest. Elexis was going to eliminate Koutarou and someday gain the very thing Koutarou was now scorning. This was the moment of truth for Elexis. He was giving his all to defeat Koutarou. He was dead set on it.

“No,” Koutarou replied boldly. “You can’t defeat me.”

Sching!

Despite being face to face with an enemy twice his size, Koutarou stepped forward and unsheathed Signaltin. Sword in hand, he glared at Elexis.

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because I’m really angry today.”

“So you’d chose to be an angry knight over an all-powerful god? That might unexpectedly be more dangerous...”

Elexis’s will was unmoving, but so was Koutarou’s. He was the Blue Knight—the hope of the country and those who lived there, and the supreme protector of the royal families. He had to survive this ordeal and protect all of them. Koutarou too was going to give his all in this fight.

The ones who launched the first attacks were Elexis and Crimson, and both of them were aiming for Koutarou. The plan was to have the two with the most attack power take down Koutarou while the remaining six of them suppressed Kiriha and the others. It was a strategy they’d devised assuming Koutarou would be using Signaltin.

“Explosion!”

Booooom!

A small cannonball about three centimeters in diameter flew out of the barrel mounted on Crimson's staff. By casting the explosion spell in the right end of the barrel, the energy of it was all directed out through the muzzle. It pushed the cannonball out with it, launching it with all the force of the explosion spell. Because of that, its speed was shockingly fast. Even to Koutarou whose reflexes were enhanced by spiritual energy, it felt like the cannonball connected just as it was fired.

Clang!

"Guh!"

The additional equipment installed on Koutarou's armor—Garb of Lord, or GoL—had an active barrier system that automatically deployed in response to enemy attacks. Koutarou, however, had disabled that function in favor of specifically having it constantly deployed on his left arm like a shield. Crimson's cannonball was so fast and there was almost no sign of her firing beforehand, so the AI in Koutarou's armor had a hard time reading her attack. He would have been out of luck without his spirit sight indicating where he needed to hold the shield to block it. But even though he'd blocked it, a speeding cannonball still had quite a kick to it. The shield deflected most of the blow, but the momentum from the hit was enough to momentarily stagger him.

"You're having a hard time against this combination, aren't you, Koutarou-kun?"

Elexis didn't miss the opening Crimson had given him. He moved in to attack staggered Koutarou.

"Tch!"

Chink!

Saguratin clashed with the blade of a massive axe. The giant mobile weapon that Elexis was using, his Warlord, had a lot of strength. The axe it was using had also been enhanced with spiritual energy. Because of that, the blow had terrific power and it sent Koutarou flying backwards even with GoL's assistance.

Pfwoosh!

But thanks to the boosters on his armor, he was able to stay on his feet. The laser cannon on Koutarou's right shoulder fired repeatedly as he quickly moved away. The next moment, Crimson's laser creating spell and the mech's mini-missiles rained down where he'd just been. If he hadn't moved back, Koutarou would have been killed on the spot.

"But why aren't you using Signaltin, Koutarou-kun? I see it's hanging at your waist."

Elexis and Crimson weren't attacking together just because they both had a lot of firepower. It was also because they could use attacks that wouldn't be nullified by Signaltin. Since it had the power to dispel magic, normal attack spells and enchanted weapons didn't work against it. However, Elexis's mech had weapons without magical effects cast on them specifically as a countermeasure against Koutarou. Crimson was also using her spells in a way that transformed her mana into different forms of energy, such as firing cannonballs and launching lasers. Neither of those could be negated by Signaltin, but they were still strong enough power to break through standard magic defenses. Elexis and Crimson were both making clever use of their powers against Koutarou.

But strangely enough, Koutarou wasn't using Signaltin in the first place. Even though he had it with him, he hadn't even drawn it. It was enough to give Elexis pause. Something seemed eerily strange, making Elexis unconsciously hold back in his attacks.

"This sword is better for fighting you guys. Well, you'll see."

It was a bluff. The reason Koutarou wasn't using Signaltin was of course because he was worried about the strain it would put on Harumi. He had to avoid doing anything that would make her collapse like that again. He knew it would be difficult to win even with Signaltin in this situation, but using it was out of the question. There was no way of telling what it would to do Harumi.

"Hey, Elexis, maybe it's not that won't use it... but that he can't."

As she listened to Elexis and Koutarou's back and forth, Crimson paid close attention to Signaltin hanging at Koutarou's waist. With her senses as a magician, she could feel the mana within the sword. And strangely enough, it seemed to be at a very low level. In the past, the sword had

emitted great power even when it was in its sheath. In the condition it was in now, however, she figured its powers were probably unusable.

“Hmm, I see. That’s certainly a possibility. If that’s the case... not being able to use Signaltin might be one of the reasons why he agreed to cooperate with us.”

After what Crimson said, Elexis finally had an inkling of Koutarou’s situation. Without the power of Signaltin—if Koutarou continued fighting without it—he would eventually meet his end. And once he did, the Reborn Forthorthian Army would probably fall apart without his support. Since there was no reason not to use Signaltin in this fight, Elexis figured Crimson was probably onto something.

“So we can go all out, right?”

“As long as you don’t let your guard down.”

Crimson and Elexis decided to be more aggressive with their attacks. While they couldn’t be 100 percent sure, they decided to proceed on the assumption that Koutarou couldn’t use Signaltin. If they were too careful, things would just take longer and ultimately put them at more risk.

Not good... Can I beat these two with just Saguratin?

Koutarou momentarily put his hand on Signaltin in its sheath, but with the continuous fighting they’d been through up until now, he knew drawing it would mean shaving away at Harumi’s life. He shunned the thought and then gripped Saguratin tightly with both hands as he readied himself.

Maya and the rest of Darkness Rainbow were fighting against Maki, Clan, and Kiriha. Maki and Clan were focused on one objective, and that was keeping Kiriha alive.

“Kii, stay back no matter what!”

“She’s right! If you don’t survive this, we’ll lose a winning battle!”

Koutarou’s death would of course do the most damage, but Kiriha’s would be a close second. As the brains of the operation, losing her would leave Koutarou and the others like a zombie. No matter how strong they were, they wouldn’t be able to make full use of that strength. It would be like

replacing the mind of a professional boxer with a complete amateur's. All they would be able to do is blindly and wildly swing their fists.

"But just the two of you can't take on all of them!" Kiriha objected.

Clan and Maki would be going up against Maya and five magical girls. Yellow had created four clay golems with her magic, and they stood on the front line alongside Maya. Purple was gathering the surrounding spirits and forming a guerilla force. Orange and Blue who were both good at long range combat and diversions were in charge of attacking with magic from the rear lines. And Green was in the very back using spells to gather all kinds of information and forwarding it to the others.

It was just the three girls against them all. Even counting the haniwas, they were still outnumbered. Moreover, their enemies were prepared to fight a force twice their size. Each and every one of them was powerful, but despite that, Clan and Maki were keeping Kiriha from actively taking part in the battle. At this rate, they wouldn't last for long.

"That's true even for the three of us!" Clan shouted to Kiriha while preparing to hold off the magical girls. "So rather than all of us getting wiped out, letting you escape is far more logical!"

"If Koutarou dies, we'll eventually be wiped out either way! We need to win this!" Kiriha shouted back.

She ignored Clan and Maki's pleading and stood shoulder to shoulder with them on the front line. Even if she managed to escape, she knew the outcome wouldn't be much different. If Clan and Maki fell, Koutarou would be next. In order to prevent that, Kiriha chose not to run. Holding her weapon, a naginata that transformed her spiritual energy into attack power, with both hands, Kiriha took a fighting stance.

"Yes, you've made the right choice. As expected of a lady of the Kurano family, you truly understand the situation you're in."

Accompanied by two clay golems on either side, Maya calmly approached. She had the same amused expression on her face she always did, but her eyes made it clear that she wasn't going to let down her guard for even a moment. Once Kiriha declared her intent to fight, Maya started her cold-hearted calculations.

“But just because you made the right choice doesn’t mean you’ll be getting the outcome you hoped for!”

Maya suddenly broke into a dash. The clay golems were unable to keep up with her, so she charged ahead of them with great speed. While she wasn’t going to let her guard down, Maya wasn’t a coward. Since Maki fought by using magic to enhance her entire body, she’d be a moment slower. Apart from her sharp mind, Kiriha was just a normal human. And while Clan had incredibly advanced technology at her disposal, she hadn’t called forth anything dangerous yet. Maya knew she still had the chance to launch a preemptive attack.

“Maya-sama really did charge in on her own...” Maki said with something like a sigh.

“‘They will try to get their strategist to escape when they’re cornered. She will realize that staying is the only way to win, but it will leave them without a solid plan for victory.’ That’s what an expert would think,” Kiriha said calmly.

“Kii, your brain really is something else,” Clan said shaking her head in amazement.

“Detonating number 142, ho!”

“Everyone evacuate, ho!”

“Impossible!” Maya gasped.

Boooooooom!

Something exploded right next to her. Though damage was minor since it wasn’t a direct hit and she had a sturdy mechanical body, Maya was still knocked back by the shockwave and temporarily blinded by the smoke and the dust it kicked up. By the time the cloud of dust cleared, there were five mobile weapons standing before Maya. It was clear that they belonged to Kiriha and the others.

“So you were only pretending like you didn’t have a plan...”

Tch...

Maya gritted her teeth in frustration. She realized that they were on an escape route Koutarou and the others had chosen themselves, and they'd been considering the possibility of coming this way since this morning. Of course they would have planned measures to intercept enemies along the way. The explosives and mobile weapons were prepared in advance and they'd had them at the ready this whole time. When Maya saw the girls arguing, she simply overlooked the possibility that this was all intentional. She'd been tricked and paid the price. While she hadn't taken any critical damage, she could feel the motors for her limbs grinding some.

"Right now you must feel both anxious from the desperation of being backed into a corner, and the relief of having caught us. So let me congratulate you the same way... Chasing after us was the right choice. But just because you made the right choice doesn't mean you'll be getting the outcome you hoped for!" Kiriha declared with a fearless smile. She radiated strength and composure, and her eyes reflected absolute confidence.

Now we actually have a chance to win, but the hard part is just about to start...

The truth, however, was that Kiriha's confidence was just another part of her gamble. She had an accurate grasp of the current situation. Even if they used all the traps and weapons they had prepared, their chances of victory weren't all that high. At best, all instilling a seed of doubt in the hearts of her enemies really did was give them a fighting chance of not being defeated instantly. That's why behind her confident facade, Kiriha was desperately racking her brain in an attempt to come up with a plan to outsmart Darkness Rainbow.

When comparing the two weapons on their own, Saguratin was in no way inferior to Signaltin. In fact, when dealing with Warlord, a piece of state-of-the-art technology from Forthorthe, Saguratin was a better option. It used spiritual energy attacks, which Forthorthian barrier technology wasn't equipped to deal with.

Clank!

"Too shallow?!"

Koutarou's attack hit the leg of Elexis's Warlord. Sadly, it was only enough to scratch the surface of its plated armor. In the past it would have been enough to cut clean through, but it seemed its defenses had been dramatically increased. His attack barely had any effect at all.

"For the third version, the armor's been greatly improved. Not only has it been enhanced with magic, but it also utilizes a hybrid mix of microvibration armor and liquid armor. The moment your sword hits, the impact is dispersed."

The giant mech of a mobile weapon that Elexis was using was officially named Warlord III. The machine had been improved each time it got more data on Koutarou and the others, and now it had been upgraded to the point that it had strength—or defense as the case may be—to match Koutarou's attacks. That's why all he could do now was scratch it.

"Honestly though, I expect that this still isn't enough to defeat you. And that's why I've arranged for some assistance as you can see."

"Oh, you mean to say you're actually counting on me?"

Booooom!

Just after Koutarou's sword was deflected, another of Crimson's cannonball assaulted him.

Crack!

The cannonball grazed Koutarou's armor, leaving a long fissure in its wake. Crimson's cannon was a major threat that couldn't be fully avoided even though he knew it was coming.

"I'm always counting on you."

"Now I understand why Maya calls you a fraud..."

If Koutarou went after Elexis, it gave Crimson a chance to take aim at him, and since he had to focus on being able to pull back, his attacks had less power behind them. Combined with Elexis's improved armor, Koutarou just wasn't able to deal the damage he needed to. Elexis and Crimson's teamwork was a growing threat too.

“Don’t say that! I really am counting on you, Crimson.”

“Sure, sure. Just make sure to leave some fun for me.”

Crimson readied her staff again, but she took aim a little differently this time.

“Another scattershot?!”

Ba-bang!

The moment Koutarou dove to the side, Crimson fired her cannon. Just as Koutarou expected, it was a scattershot. It was a wide area attack to begin with, but with the power of Crimson’s cannon, the range she got in the attack was incredible. It was practically a scattershot wall.

“Urgh!”

“Critical alert: Left arm control circuit damaged. Bypass is unprocessable. Power cut. Currently attempting to detach the process.”

Crimson had Koutarou on the run. Evading a scattershot wall was difficult enough as it was, but a second and third followed. She was driving him into a corner so Elexis could finish him off. Really, she was pinning him in with suppressing fire so Elexis could attack with his axe, beams, and guided missiles. Avoiding all of those attacks at once was practically impossible, and Koutarou’s barrier had already given out on him. His armor was only functioning at half power too.

“I’m amazed you chose to come for me in this situation, Koutarou-kun!”

“It’s not like I can win by running!”

Chink!

Koutarou’s Saguratin and Elexis’s axe clashed. The fierce impact knocked the wind out of Koutarou, but he didn’t let it stop him. His left hand on the hilt of his sword began glowing.

“How about this?!”

Zzzzzt!

Koutarou was wearing the blue gauntlet he'd gotten from Kiriha on his left hand. It had the power to convert spiritual energy into electricity and fire. Koutarou had used it to generate an electric shock powerful enough to travel through his sword, through the axe, and into Elexis's Warlord.

"A clever idea, but not clever enough! I've already taken precautions against that attack!"

Pow!

Warlord kicked Koutarou without even flinching from the shock. Warlord III was designed with Koutarou and the others' abilities in mind, and that included the electricity and fire attacks Koutarou and the haniwas could use. It was perfectly insulated, meaning the electricity traveled through the exterior of the armor and into the ground.

"Agh..."

While Koutarou's electric attack was ineffective, the kick from Elexis's Warlord hit him straight on. It knocked him back and put a big dent in his armor. As he rolled along the ground, blood flew out of his mouth. The blow had damaged Koutarou's internal organs.

"Isn't it about time you stop being so stubborn and just use Signaltin already?"

Crimson was right. If he could use Signaltin, now would be the time. Illusions. Blinding attacks. Anything would be fine. If he could just break up Elexis and Crimson's teamwork, he still might be able to turn the tables. Crimson was actually giving him a chance because that's what she was waiting for. She wanted to fight the Blue Knight at his strongest, and until then, she was willing to acquiesce to playing support for Elexis.

"Urgh... N-No can do. I'm a knight after all."

Clang!

Koutarou thrust his sword into the ground and used it as support to get back up on his feet. Once standing, he pulled the sword up with one hand and wiped the blood away from his mouth with the other.

"I don't get it... but you're really going to die soon."

“You never know until you try! I’ve been through dangers like this several times before!”

Sching!

Koutarou readied Saguratin once more. There wasn’t even a shred of hesitation in his eyes. His determination to win using just Saguratin was unwavering.

“I don’t know what’s driving you to do this... but you seem devoted to this idea of being a knight. Splendid, Koutarou-kun! But I won’t hold back because of that. We have our own reasons for not stepping down.”

“Come and get it, Elexis. I’ll show you just what makes me the Blue Knight.”

“Just the way I want it! Here I come, Koutarou-kun!”

Koutarou and Elexis advanced towards each other at the same time. Koutarou had accumulated a lot of damage, but his appearance as he rushed forward was anything but weak. Despite his wounds, his charge was powerful. Even if a perfect stranger had seen him in that moment, they probably would have been convinced that Koutarou was the Blue Knight.

As Koutarou was fighting his hardest against Elexis, Kiriha and the others were also being gradually cornered. Despite mobile weapons and armaments being prepared beforehand, taking on Maya and five magical girls at the same time was a bit too much for them.

“It’s not like you guys are weak. You’re just outnumbered. Come on, it’s not like you’re Nana...”

Maya held Kiriha and the others in high regard. She was surprised that they were able to put up a fight despite being at such a disadvantage. While they weren’t on the same level as Nana who could fight all of Darkness Rainbow herself, this gave Nana a run for her money. The proof could be seen on Maya and the magical girls. Each and every one of them was wounded.

“But this is as far as you get. You’re almost at your limits, don’t you think? Both the mobile weapons and Maki’s illusions.”

Kiriha, Clan, and Maki were fighting alongside the five mobile weapons and under the cover of Maki's illusions. That made two of each of them, and Kiriha had Maki recast the illusions as necessary. But that wasn't all. They changed appearances, turned into each other, and appeared from nowhere. It was a clever way to make Green's predictions as confusing as possible. With their appearances shifting at random, it became difficult to tell who's future was who's. It gave them just enough of an edge to fight back.

"This is nothing. We still have more plans," Kiriha boldly declared.

Though she flashed a confident smile, she was disappointed.

If only we had been able to do a little more damage to them while we were able to throw off their readings...

All five mobile weapons were slowed from the damage they'd taken, and a couple were on the verge of shutting down. After continuously creating and refreshing illusions, Maki was starting to run out of mana. They wouldn't be able to fight for much longer like this. If they'd been able to hit Darkness Rainbow a little harder earlier, they still might have had a chance, but sadly that wasn't how things had panned out. Kiriha was still running all kinds of plans in her head, but she couldn't think of anything that might realistically work in this situation.

"If you have something up your sleeve, you should hurry it up. It looks like they're about to finish things up over there," Maya said with a casual nod over her shoulder.

"Satomi-kun?!"

"It can't be!"

Kiriha had already realized the trouble Koutarou was in, but Maki and Clan didn't notice until Maya said something. Koutarou was battered and bruised. He was covered in blood, and his armor barely looked functional. He was still standing, but it was obvious even from a distance that he was in dire straits.

"That's good, Crimson! Now just kill him!" Green shouted excitedly when she saw it too.

She normally came off as quiet and intelligent, but her blood boiled when it came to Maki. She knew that the loss of Koutarou would grieve Maki deeply, and it was the hope of being able to revel in that dark joy that drove her spitefully forward.

“I won’t let you!” Maki cried as she made a sudden move for Koutarou.

“Hey now, Maki. I’m your opponent, remember?”

“Maya-sama...”

Of course, Maya and the others weren’t naive enough to let her do that. They all moved to block her way and began to attack again with Maya in the lead. The combat blade sticking out of her hand glimmered in the light of the cemetery.

“We’re going to make it come true, Maki!”

Chink!

Maya’s blade met Maki’s sword, her transformed staff. The attack spells cast on both weapons cancelled each other out and dissipated in a bright flash.

“Make what come true?!”

Whump!

Maki kicked at Maya, but she easily caught the blow. While she might have given up the title of Navy, her skills hadn’t lessened any. If anything, her mechanical body made her even more dangerous.

“Die and return to your homeland! This will be your final resting place!”

Maya was referencing a commonly used phrase Folsaria. It didn’t mean much more than drop dead, but it embodied certain feelings for Forthorthe. Especially here in Rushstock Cemetery, where soldiers who died fighting for Forthorthe were laid to rest. There was no better place than this for a Folsarian to die. Maya was planning on finishing things once and for all with her disciple here.

“Pull back for now, Maki!” Kiriha called to her.

“But Satomi-kun is...!”

“You couldn’t get to him even if you charged in! You were Maya’s disciple, so you should know that better than anyone!”

“Tch...”

The situation was bad enough as it was, but it looked like Koutarou was about to go down. Maya and the other girls were intentionally keeping Maki, Clan, and Kiriha from getting to him to help. The future they had all feared was rapidly drawing near. Knowing death was upon the boy they all loved, all they could do now was pray.

How many times had Koutarou fallen to the ground now? Elexis and Crimson had attacked him repeatedly with the intent to kill. They could feel their hits connect. They thought they’d killed him for sure. Yet he stood back up each time.

“What drives you to go so far, Koutarou-kun?”

His armor had long since stopped functioning, and it was now worth no more protection than the metal it was made out of. Even then, the holes and dents in it compromised its integrity. It was plain to see it was pretty worthless. There was no way he should be able to stand, but he somehow managed every time. Elexis couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“...Wh-Who knows? I just keep getting back up...”

Koutarou’s voice was weak and hard to hear. He barely had the strength left to speak.

“Just stay down. Then it’ll all be over.”

“...I can’t do that... I’m the Blue Knight after all...”

Drip, drop...

As Koutarou raised himself up again, more and more blood trickled through his armor onto the ground.

“...Hahaha... Yeah... That might be the reason. It’s because I-I’m the Blue Knight, Elexis...”

“Koutarou-kun...”

“I’m... the Blue Knight that led the men resting here to the battlefield. There’s no way I can stay down...”

The dead resting in Rushstock Cemetery were soldiers from long ago, and some of them were the very same men Koutarou had fought alongside. They had laid down their lives with absolute faith in Koutarou. Faith that he would save Forthorthe.

“If I fall here... what did they all die for? I would never be able to face them again...”

That was what drove Koutarou to get up every time. It wasn’t a question of whether he could or couldn’t do it; he simply had to. He wasn’t going to give up on this fight. Not until it killed him.

“I can’t afford to rest!”

Koutarou tried to ready the sword he was dragging, but his arms could barely move. After putting all of his strength into it, he was finally able to lift the sword. His arms were badly wounded like the rest of his body, so that act alone caused him acute pain. But that changed nothing. He held Saguratin with an adamantine will.

“I suppose I can see why the people of the past followed you. You really are splendid, Koutarou-kun, so I’ll stay with you until the end too.”

Sching!

Elexis had Warlord ready its axe. He no longer needed Crimson’s support. He was going to settle this one on one.

“Here I come, Koutarou-kun.”

“Come and get it, Elexis.”

Whoosh!

Warlord kicked off the ground with its powerful legs, sending its hulking body flying forward. Accelerating so smoothly it was hard to believe that it was a five meter tall giant, Warlord rapidly approached Koutarou.

I’m sorry, everyone... It looks like this is as far as I go...

In stark contrast, Koutarou wasn’t moving at all. It was all he could do to hold his sword over his head, but Warlord’s massive axe closed in on him in the blink of an eye.

But I am the Blue Knight! And I will never give up!

Koutarou put the last of his strength into bringing his sword down. By now, however, his consciousness was already starting to fade, so she wasn’t even sure if his arms were actually moving or not. But he chose to believe, and poured everything he had into that swing. His vision went white and everything went numb, but he was intent on that final swing even as his consciousness dissolved into nothingness.

When he came to, Koutarou was standing alone on a small hill in a meadow that spread as far as the eye could see. The meadow grasses swaying in the breeze shone gold as the gentle evening sun poured light down on them. It looked almost like a golden sea.

“...This is...”

The scene was familiar to Koutarou. This was where he’d said his final farewell to Alaia and Charl.

“So I died... and came here.”

Koutarou could remember what happened. His last memories before ending up on this hill were of the rapidly approaching Warlord and its giant axe. He was quite sure that was what had sent him here.

“I guess I’m surprisingly romantic.”

He had no room to poke fun at Theia anymore. He couldn’t help laughing bitterly to himself at this unexpected outcome. And as if responding to his voice, what sounded like the laughter of several people rang out around him. Surprised, Koutarou hurriedly turned around and was met with the sight of people where there had been none before. Before he knew it, there were countless people standing there on the hill with him.

“You’re mistaken, Your Excellence. This is still the same place. It’s just that it looks how it did two thousand years ago... The same as us.”

Koutarou recognized some of the faces in the growing crowd. Some of them were people he knew well.

“I see, so this is where Rushstock Cemetery was built... That must mean you guys came to pick me up?”

They were all people that Koutarou had met two thousand years in the past. They were the knights and soldiers that had died in battle—the very people that should be resting in Rushstock Cemetery. Thinking that he was going to join them, Koutarou didn’t think that his fate was such a bad thing after all. He believed he could take pride in what he’d accomplished, knowing he’d given it his all and done absolutely everything in his humanly power.

“You’re half right, half wrong, Your Excellence.”

A different soldier spoke up in answer to his question. It was a man who’d died in a defensive battle shortly after the Reborn Forthorthian Army rose up. He was one of the soldiers directly under Koutarou’s command.

“Before we pick up our comrade-in-arms, there’s something we’d like to ask you, Layous-sama.”

This time it was a knight who’d fallen during a surprise attack on their march towards Fornorn that spoke up. Koutarou could recall the deaths of each of his comrades. There were many of them, but he had engraved the memory of each one into his heart so that he would never forget. Their deaths fell on his shoulders. He was the one who’d led them all to the battlefield.

“Ask me anything. I have nothing to hide from you,” Koutarou replied without hesitation.

“Then... Layous-sama, why didn’t you use Signaltin even in the very end? Couldn’t you at the very least have used its powers of protection? Just rejecting it like that... I feel sorry for Her Majesty Alaia.”

“Hey now, did you all come here to voice your discontent?”

“That’s not it, but... We just don’t understand the reason.”

“Well... I think Her Majesty Alaia has fought more than enough. She gave everything for this country.”

“So you rejected everything?”

“That’s right. After two thousand years, Her Majesty’s wish was finally granted and she was able to live a peaceful life as a normal girl. That’s why I don’t want her to fight anymore. I can’t let her sacrifice everything again, now can I?”

It wasn’t hard to imagine why Alaia wanted to live an ordinary life. She was a gentle girl that didn’t like fighting after all. And now, finally after all this time, Alaia reincarnated as Harumi was living out that dream. Koutarou just couldn’t accept dragging her into another battle that would mean sacrificing her life for the sake of Forthorthe. That was why, even in the bitter end, he hadn’t drawn Signaltin. He had even rejected its powers of protection and regeneration all to fulfill his own wish. To allow her to remain an ordinary girl.

“You’re as stubborn as ever, Your Excellence.”

“But that’s just like Layous-sama.”

“I told you, didn’t I? We should have just done what I said from the start.”

“What are you talking about?” Koutarou asked as the others talked amongst themselves.

The crowd gathered around him laughed merrily, but that only confused Koutarou further. He looked around, completely at a loss for how to interpret their reaction.

“We’ve decided that we’re not going to pick you up. We’re going to send you away instead.”

“Send me away? But I’m already dead.”

Koutarou had been cut down by Elexis’s axe. There was nowhere else for him to be sent if he was already dead. He couldn’t understand what they were talking about.

“No, you’re not dead yet, Your Excellence.”

“What?!” Koutarou exclaimed.

“We just wanted to ask you why weren’t using Signaltin before that happened.”

“But you’re the same as you always were, Your Excellence, so we can send you away without reservations.”

“There is still a lot that you have to do, Layous-sama.”

Koutarou couldn’t get his head around what his former comrades were saying.

“Wait a minute, I don’t know what—”

He’d genuinely believed he was dead, but now they were telling him that wasn’t true. Not only that, but they were going to send him away somewhere. And he wasn’t given time to process what was happening. The surrounding area began to fill with a white light, much the same way it had before he ended up on the hill.

“You said that you would protect Her Majesty Alaia. That’s all that matters.”

“Protecting this country and the safety of the people that live here is the reason we’ve remained in this place for two thousand years. And if Her Majesty Alaia is now among those people, we only have one choice.”

“Layous-sama, we will fight too. There’s a limit to what we can do, but it should make all the difference.”

“Please lead us. Just like you did two thousand years ago.”

In the bright white light, they all smiled. One after another, they raised their weapons high. And it wasn’t just the people who’d fought alongside Koutarou in the past either. The gesture was mirrored by all the men and women there, every last soldier resting at Rushstock Cemetery. The proud guardians that had given their lives fighting for Forthorthe and its citizens would take one last stand.

Saguratin began emitting light as Koutarou was in the middle of swinging it down. Though it was white at first, the light turned gold as it grew

stronger. When he saw it, it reminded Koutarou of the meadow in the evening sun and the color of Theia's hair.

"Hyaaaaaaaah!"

"Hyaaaaaaaah!"

Both Koutarou and Elexis roared as Saguratin's glowing golden blade clashed with Warlord's thick, sharp axe. Just a few moments ago, this would have resulted in the blows largely canceling each other out and Koutarou getting pushed back.

Sching!

"Wh-What?!"

But not now. When Saguratin's glowing blade met Warlord's axe, it didn't slow down at all. It kept going and cleaved the axe clean in two.

"What just happened?! And what is that light?!"

Elexis couldn't hide how shocked he was. This unexpected turn of events was rather unsettling. Up until now, the axe's durability and the various technologies installed in it had allowed it to completely block all of Saguratin's attacks without trouble. And yet all of a sudden, it was like that meant nothing. His axe hadn't just been repelled or blocked either. It had been cut in half. What was left of it revealed that the cut was completely smooth, making it quite clear that it hadn't broken due to metal fatigue. There was no explanation other than Saguratin's cutting edge suddenly getting much, much sharper.

"Koutarou-kun, what is that?! What did you do?!"

"I don't really know either. I didn't do anything, personally."

Koutarou moments ago had been so badly injured that he was limping and weak, yet now he was walking like normal. He readied his sword once more as if nothing had happened. The golden light from his sword was still getting stronger, and it now enveloped Koutarou's body too.

"All I know is that you guys were wrong about something," Koutarou said as he looked up at Elexis.

“Wrong, you say?”

“You said that you guys would have lost if we hadn’t come here, and that you’ve now overcome your greatest crisis.”

“That’s right. That’s why we were able to catch up to you, after all.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. You’ve lost because we *did* come here.”

With the spirits of the soldiers in the cemetery on his side now, Koutarou was convinced that it would be impossible to defeat him. He didn’t know the exact reason why, but he had every confidence victory would smile on him.

What is this...? What happened with Koutarou-kun?!

Elexis was outright baffled. Koutarou, who was at death’s door moments ago, had all of a sudden cut his axe in half and was now boldly approaching him. And it was hard to blame Elexis for being so confused. This bizarre reversal had sprung up just as he was about to deliver the finishing blow.

The answer to everything came in the form of a message from his companions.

“You can’t fight the Blue Knight straight up, Elexis!”

“Purple! What’s happening here?!”

“Over 99 percent of the spiritual energy in this area is being controlled by the Blue Knight now! He’s even taken control of the spirits I had under my spell! His control is too strong for me to take them back!”

“Impossible! That can’t be true!”

“But it is, Elexis! If you fight him head on like that, you’re going to lose!”

Purple’s assessment wasn’t quite right. Koutarou wasn’t controlling the spirits. They were moving on their own to support and protect him. A clear sense of purpose had given them the power to resist Purple’s necromancy. As a result, it looked like Koutarou was controlling them, and realistically, it had the same effect.

“So the knights and soldiers resting in the cemetery are lending him their strength? Damn it!”

Elexis now understood the full weight of what Koutarou had said. Regardless of how it worked, Koutarou was being protected by almost all of the spirits at Rushstock Cemetery. Their combined spiritual energy was on a completely different level than Koutarou’s on his own. Challenging him to close combat now would just be asking for defeat.

“Crimson, we’re going in at the same time!”

“Ahahaha, things are finally getting exciting!”

Unlike Elexis, Crimson was ecstatic as this abrupt turn of events. A fight against a strong opponent was exactly what she wanted. She was bored by the idea of fighting Koutarou when he wasn't using Signaltin, but this made things interesting again. Facing a new, powerful force separate from Signaltin, Crimson's very soul trembled with joy.

"How about this?!" Elexis shouted.

Warlord threw a metallic globe that had been attached to its waist. It was an anti-Blue Knight grenade, designed to unleash a powerful shockwave that covered several meters when activated. Since the computer would determine exactly when to activate it, it still functioned as a land mine in the case that it missed its target initially.

"This is nothing!"

Clang!

Koutarou made a wide swing with Saguratin. When he did, the golden light from the sword knocked the globe away without activating it. But as he swung his sword, he left himself open for a brief moment. That opportunity was exactly what Crimson was waiting for.

"Greater Explosion!"

Booooom!

Crimson launched a cannonball using a larger explosion than normal. Doing that put more strain on the cannon and could potentially damage the barrel, so it wasn't an attack that could be used repeatedly. However, her battle instincts told her that she'd need it against Koutarou.

"I don't think you can dodge this, Koutarou!"

The cannonball moved with blinding speed. It was completely invisible to the naked eye. If it weren't for the sound it made, there would have been no way to tell it had even been fired. And even though he knew it was coming, Koutarou was still in the follow-through of his sword swing and incapable of moving out of the way in time.

"Yeah. And that's why I won't."

“What?!”

However, the cannonball only grazed Koutarou’s cheek and continued flying. While it had drawn blood, he hadn’t taken any real damage.

“What was that?!” Crimson shouted.

She was sure of her aim, and she had certainly aimed for Koutarou. There was no way she should have missed at this distance. Koutarou hadn’t moved either, yet her attack still didn’t connect. Crimson looked like she had fallen for a scam.

“The area around Koutarou is sacred ground! Bullets won’t fly straight!” Elexis warned her.

If Sanae had been there, she would have seen a knight protecting Koutarou with his shield. Warlord’s spiritual energy sensor, however, interpreted what happened as an indication that the grounds were sacred.

“Sacred ground, huh? Heh heh, that’s more like it!”

Eager to fight a powerful opponent, Crimson held her staff with both hands and charged at Koutarou. She looked excited, if not outright happy.

“Don’t act rashly, Crimson!” Elexis called after her.

Warlord was beginning to detect more and more sacred ground. And it wasn’t just around Koutarou. It was now appearing around Crimson and Elexis too. Elexis realized it in time and had Warlord fall back, but Crimson charged right into it.

“Kyaah!”

Thud!

In the middle of her charge, Crimson suddenly lost strength in her legs and fell forward. She had no idea what had happened, but she knew it wasn’t the end of it. She quickly twisted her body in a roll across the ground to dodge what came next.

Slash!

Golden light from Saguratin burrowed into the ground where Crimson had just been, shearing a few strands of her long hair as she rolled away.

“J-Just what is...”

“Fall back, Crimson! It’s not just Koutarou-kun’s sword that’s gotten stronger! He’s probably being protected by an army of spirits!”

Elexis was essentially guessing, but he was right. Spearmen had attacked Crimson. Their spears coming into contact with her legs drained her spiritual energy, which had temporarily immobilized her.

“So that’s your game, is it? Astral Sight!”

Retreating with the help of covering fire from Elexis, Crimson cast a spell that let her see spirits. While she couldn’t clearly see their forms, she could easily tell that they were trying to surround her and Elexis.

“This is absurd! What do we do, Elexis?”

“There are ways to fight it now that we know what’s going on! And it looks like our reinforcements made it just in time!”

Nyoom!

Two transport planes came in for a landing behind Warlord and Crimson. One of them was carrying the task force DKI used to carry out its more illicit tasks. If they rushed in with spiritual energy weapons, they should be able to deal with the army of spirits.

“What a coincidence. We just got reinforcements too.”

A golden flag passed by above Koutarou and the others. Following behind it were five girls riding a giant dragon.

“Koutarou, we’ve come to save you!”

The one in the lead with the flag was Theia. The dragon was Shizuka transformed, and on her back were Ruth, Sanae, Yurika, Nana, and Harumi—the girls Koutarou had left behind.

“Curses! It’s the princess and the others!”

Elexis gritted his teeth in frustration. With both sides receiving reinforcements, the outcome was uncertain, and having their surefire shot at victory slip out of their grasp was a painful blow.

“I’m fine here! You guys help the others!” Koutarou called to the girls.

“Yeah! I’m enough to help Koutarou! Everyone here is really pumped up!” Sanae shouted.

As the dragon passed by overhead, Sanae jumped off and started falling towards the ground in a tailspin. It looked like a deadly stunt, but her falling speed rapidly slowed as she descended and she landed softly like a feather.

“Alaia-sama herself has come!”

“Even Princess Charl is here...”

“Put your all into this! With Clan-sama, we have three princesses gathered before us!”

“If we lose now, we’ll be shamed for all eternity!”

The arrival of Theia and the others excited the spirits protecting Koutarou. Their already high morale skyrocketed to new heights.

“Get ready for battle, men. We’re going to destroy the enemy’s main forces. Take a crane wing formation. Recruits, move alongside the veterans.”

The spirits clamored in excitement until Koutarou gave his orders. Under his command, they spread out and fell into line. The wing-shaped formation was composed of soldiers from battles spanning over two thousand years, but they all shared the same objective now. Protect the country, its citizens, and the royal families alongside the Blue Knight. Their hearts were united.

“Crimson, group up with Maya and the others!” Elexis shouted to her.

“Are you sure?!”

“I’ve got my own reinforcements! I’ll be fine! But now that the princess and the others have come, the others won’t be able to hold them off!”

“Okay!”

Facing against them were Elexis and DKI’s combat squad. Crimson moving over to assist Maya and the others made it easier for Koutarou, but Elexis wouldn’t let him win that easily. While Koutarou, Sanae, and the spirits had a numerical advantage, the combat squad equipped with spiritual energy weapons was a force to be reckoned with.

“We’re finally at the endgame now, Koutarou-kun.”

“And whoever wins this battle will accomplish their true goal. Let’s settle this, Elexis!”

Would Koutarou and the girls be able to protect the Forthorthe they’d come to know and love? Or would Elexis and his associates destroy it to create a new one? The curtain rose on the final battle between two sides who had both long been awaiting this day.

Even though both of them had given up their titles as magical girls, Maya and Nana were still fated rivals. Being the last two of their generation, there was a special significance to their battle.

“You’re going all out from the start? Your commitment is fantastic as always, Nana!”

“Nothing good will come from taking it slow today!”

Nana was keeping the swiftly moving Maya on the run with her sharpshooting. While Maya’s mechanical body had better performance, Nana had comparable power when taking her armaments into account. More importantly, their battle wouldn’t simply be settled by strength alone.

“Haaaaa!”

“Maki?!”

Maki was lying in wait in the spot where Nana had pinned Maya with suppressive fire. She swung her staff—transformed into a greatsword—

horizontally as Maya approached. But just like Nana had Maki, Maya had her own ally.

“Looks like you can still fight, Maki!”

“Crimson!”

Shink!

Crimson blocked Maki’s attack with one of her own. She brought down her staff, which had been transformed into a two-handed battleaxe. And since she’d enchanted it with an attack spell, the impact from her swing was much heavier than Maki’s. Unable to handle the blow, Maki fell backwards. Not missing her chance, Crimson tried to finish Maki off with a thunder spell that had a short incantation.

“Thunder B—”

“Crimson, no! Continue running to the right!”

“Poison Mist!”

Poof!

At Green’s warning, Crimson cut her incantation short and ran to the right, Maki’s left. The very next moment, a green fog appeared where she’d just been standing. If she’d waited a second longer to finish her incantation, she’d likely have been enveloped in that toxic cloud. Worse yet, since the fog was highly conductive, Crimson would have been the victim of her own spell.

“Thanks, Green.”

“Be careful. Rainbow is waiting for openings like that to attack. Apart from poison, I’m having visions of her using acid and rot in the future as well.”

The one that had called forth the poison mist was none other than Yurika, who was currently behind Maki. It was only thanks to Green’s divination that Crimson had been able to escape it.

“Wouldn’t she be better off on our side?” asked Maya a bit warily.

Maya, who had also barely escaped danger, felt threatened by the way Yurika was using her magic. She was truly living up to the title of Nana's successor.

"Are you okay, Maki-chan?!" Yurika exclaimed.

"Yes, thank you."

Yurika held her hand out to Maki, who had landed on her rear when she fell backward. Maki took it without hesitation and quickly stood up. Nana stood guard next to the two of them, and after confirming that they were ready to fight again, she broke into a run.

"I see you don't plan on letting me rest, Nana!"

"I see you still love jokes, Maya. You're really the one who was waiting for us to let our guard down."

As little time as possible should be spent standing still. Nana knew better than anyone that defeat would come in an instant if an opening revealed itself.

As the fated confrontation between the others using magic began, Theia, Shizuka, Clan, and Ruth entered the fray on their own terms. They were up against the remaining four from Darkness Rainbow: Purple, Orange, Yellow, and Blue.

Rat tat tat tat!

"Your Highness, you're shooting too much! You'll run out of ammunition if you keep that up!"

"Our opponents are a group of magicians! If we lose the initiative, we'll be defeated immediately!"

Theia's plan was simple: launch a surprise attack from the air, then continue attacking to keep the pressure on them and keep them from using much magic. Fortunately, it was going well. All the dark magical girls could do was cast defensive spells and fall back. Theia's firepower was too much for them.

“What are we going to do, Purple?! At this rate, they’re just going to wear us down!”

Orange was usually the one in Darkness Rainbow to play around, but even she understood how bad the situation was now and turned to Purple for advice. After fighting against Kiriha, Clan, and Maki before Theia and the others arrived, they had already burned through about half of their mana. If they continued letting Theia shoot at them, they might end up using all of their remaining mana on defensive spells.

“Calm down, Orange,” Purple urged her.

She could understand why Orange was getting worried. While their defensive spells were stopping the bullets, having them constantly whizzing past was enough to put anyone on edge. However, they had to remain calm.

“But...!”

“No matter how advanced the technology, there’s no weapon that can fire without end. There’s a limit to the bullets she has, and the barrel is already overheated and red. The shooting should stop soon.”

Purple made a very valid point. Because of Theia’s continuous shooting, the rapidly firing machine gun in her hands had less than 10 percent of its ammo remaining and the barrel was starting to distort from the heat. She knew the precious few remaining bullets couldn’t be wasted with careless aim.

“Purple is right, Orange. The more important problem is that girl closing in while we can’t move,” Blue added.

Not even the normally quiet Blue could stay silent in their current predicament. While Theia was spraying them with constant fire, Shizuka was turning around overhead and coming right for them. It was clear what she was trying to do. If left be, she’d fly right into them once the shooting stopped.

“I’ll handle the one coming in. If it’s just one hit, I should be able to hold it off. Orange, you’re the only one who can deal any damage to her, so use that opportunity to hit her!” suggested Yellow.

“O-Okay, I’ll give it a try!” Orange agreed.

Shizuka’s combat potential was exceptional. While she wasn’t good at long distance attacks, her ferocity in close combat and her staggering defenses bolstered by magic were in a league of their own. However, Orange specialized in alteration and could manipulate the properties of objects. It might just be what Darkness Rainbow needed to defeat Shizuka. In order to give Orange an opening to attack with her magic, Yellow, their specialist in defense and enhancement, would serve as the decoy. It was the most practical combination of the powers the four girls had against Shizuka.

Pssshwn...

Theia’s machine gun finally powered down and the firing ceased. The girls didn’t have any more time to think. As Shizuka approached, Yellow put up a defensive barrier. Orange stood behind her, ready to attack. Purple and Blue were casting spells to keep Theia and the others at bay.

“Hraaaaaaaah!”

Shizuka’s right fist crashed into Yellow’s defensive spell as she dove in from above. Now in her half-dragon form, she had tremendous strength. It was more than enough to destroy Yellow’s barrier. But even then, it gave Orange the opening she needed.

“Decrease Iron!”

The moment Yellow’s barrier collapsed, Orange’s spell assaulted Shizuka. She’d chosen one intended to dramatically reduce the iron in a given area, so strictly speaking, it wasn’t an attack spell. However, as all living creatures had iron in their bodies to help carry oxygen through the blood, suddenly losing that meant faintness or loss of consciousness. Even though Shizuka had the power of a dragon, the same still held true for her.

“Wah!”

“Are you okay, Shizuka?!”

“I-I’m okay, somehow...”

Shizuka was just barely able to keep her wits about her thanks to her high magic resistance and exceptional constitution. Though she staggered with a pained look on her face, she didn't collapse.

"We can do this!" Orange shouted as she decided to launch another attack.

Based on her appearance, she determined that Shizuka would likely collapse if hit by the same spell again. Orange's uneasiness from earlier was now replaced with courage as she saw a clear glimmer of hope for victory.

"I won't let that happen!" Theia shouted.

Since she'd taken Orange's attack before, Theia realized the situation Shizuka was in before anyone else did. She fired four guided missiles from her combat dress and attacked Orange, who was in the middle of her incantation.

"Jeez, you're never any fun, princess!"

"As if I'd just keep letting you have your way!"

Orange had to stop casting her spell and start running to try and avoid the incoming missiles. She only managed to escape two of them. The other two caught up to her.

"Mirror Image!"

"Instant Invisibility!"

But just before they actually hit, Purple and Blue both cast spells to protect Orange. Purple's spell created a fake Orange, and Blue's spell hid the real one. The missiles chasing after the illusory Orange then crashed into the ground and exploded.

"Thank you, everyone!"

Boom!

"Kyaaah!"

Just as Orange was letting out a sigh of relief, Yellow screamed. The missiles that Orange thought she'd escaped had actually taken a sudden turn and hit Yellow from a blind spot.

"These schemes of yours are like works of art, Clan..." Theia commented, somewhat amazed.

"Would you lay off it?!" Clan snapped.

The sneak attack was Clan's doing. She had intercepted control of the missiles mid-flight and targeted Yellow while she was defenseless and distracted. Not even Darkness Rainbow could do anything about that.

"Shizuka-sama, now's your chance!" Ruth called out.

"Thanks! I let my guard down a little there."

While the dark magical girls were all focused on Yellow, Ruth's swarm of unmanned aircrafts retreated with Shizuka. With that, the battle had essentially started over.

"Still, that's Darkness Rainbow for you. They certainly aren't going to give us an easy win. We'll need to keep it together," said Theia once the other girls reformed the line on their side.

Now that she had spent all the ammunition for it, Theia casually tossed her machine gun aside and took out the rapid fire beam rifle she always used.

"Now then, what to do...?"

While the missiles had done considerable damage to Yellow, Shizuka had taken about as much. Neither side had a decided advantage at this point, and the outcome of the battle rested on a razor's edge. Really, their fight had only just begun.

The remaining two girls of room 106, Kiriha and Harumi, were distancing themselves from the battle at hand. Still weak, Harumi wasn't allowed to join in. As Koutarou had ordered Signaltin not to use its powers, it wouldn't respond to Harumi's control over it either. That's why all she could was look on from afar.

"Everyone is fighting, and all I can do is watch..."

Harumi frowned impatiently and intensively stared at the battle unfolding. It was very painful for her to be the only one unable to participate.

“The same is true for me. There’s no need to be ashamed.”

“But that’s your job, Kiriha-san. In comparison, I...”

Kiriha was watching from the rear for the benefit of the whole group. With a decent vantage point, she could monitor how things were going and offer strategy, advice, and backup accordingly. Even now, she was making calculated shots with her rifle and issuing orders to her haniwas. She was in control of the entire battlefield.

“You are without a doubt the biggest contributor to this battle. Because you continued to give Koutarou a salary, we were able to find a way to neutralize DKI and remove Vandarion from power with a minimal amount of sacrifices. No one, not even while you’re here on the rear line, would dare call you powerless.”

Kiriha wasn’t making a distinction between Harumi and Alaia anymore. After what they knew now, Kiriha felt such a thing was no longer necessary when Harumi’s hair shone silver.

“Kiriha-san...”

Harumi felt similarly. Alaia’s actions were ultimately hers in the end, and that’s how she’d come to thing of things.

“Besides, the heroes protecting Koutarou over there are only present because you protected Forthorthe. Your legacy is still protecting Koutarou.”

“...Yes, I think so too.”

Thanks to Kiriha, Harumi was finally able to smile a little. Fighting directly wasn’t everything. Even as she was now, she was of use to Koutarou. Hearing someone tell her that in this moment was a most welcome reassurance.

“But speaking of... There is something else for you to do here.”

“What’s that?”

“Pray for the victory for the people fighting over there. That will become their strength, allowing them to protect Koutarou and the country.”

“That might be true. It’s certainly much better than worrying...”

And so Harumi began praying. She prayed for the people fighting in front of her not to end up as sacrifices, and she made no distinction between friend and foe in that. Harumi, the same as Alaia, had love for all the citizens of Forthorthe.

There were countless heroes resting in Rushstock Cemetery, but it required a great deal of spiritual energy in order for them to have any power in the mortal realm. That’s why only a hundred or so heroes could fight alongside Koutarou at the same time. Those who couldn’t instead lent their strength to Saguratin and their allies, indirectly participating in the battle.

On the opposite side, DKI had forty men in its combat squad. While they were outnumbered by the spirits, they had superior gear. Each one of them was armed with spiritual energy weapons and equipped with spiritual energy armor effective against the spirits. Taking their numbers and equipment into account, the overall power balance was even between the two sides.

“A crane wing formation, how antique! Granted, it was the appropriate strategy to use with superior numbers!” shouted Elexis.

“And the rest is up to us!” Koutarou shouted right back.

In an even fight, strategy would make all the difference. The crane wing formation that Koutarou had chosen arranged his forces in something of a U-shaped configuration, with the objective ultimately being to approach and surround the enemy force. With both sides well matched in strength, using their numerical advantage to surround the enemy was a smart move.

On the other hand, the formation had a weakness. If the connecting point of the U formation was broken, it would divide the troops from each other, inevitably leading to them getting surrounded and defeated rather than the enemy. And it was for that reason that while the formation was often used in the past, it also had a long list of defeats to its name. Of course, Elexis was well aware of that. Accordingly, he now arranged his troops in a

vertical triangle with the intent to hard target the center of the U formation where Koutarou, Sanae, and the veteran spirits were gathered.

Elexis himself would lead the charge so that the fight would be decided in a clash between Koutarou and Elexis directly. If Koutarou fell, that would spell defeat for his side. But if Elexis fell, Koutarou's strategy would work and he would be able to seize victory. A fight between generals—a rarity in modern Forthorthe—would determine the outcome of the entire battle.

"Regardless of the end result, this will likely be our last battle! The thought honestly saddens me a little, Koutarou-kun!"

While repeatedly firing the beam shotgun on his mech's left arm, Elexis closed in on Koutarou. With the help of the spirits, normal shots would never hit Koutarou now. And with the beam set to scatter at its maximum range, the most it would do was scorch his armor. The real point of the barrage was to limit Koutarou's movements.

"Not me, Elexis! I'd rather never have to fight!"

Koutarou's GoL and armor had both practically stopped functioning, but thanks to the power of the spirits covering his body, he could move even faster than normal. Of course, Saguratin's power had also greatly increased. He dodged the constant shotgun fire with ease and closed in on Elexis's Warlord.

"It sounds so meaningful when you say it!"

Clank!

Saguratin was caught by the knife in Warlord's right hand. Since it had a great deal of spiritual energy concentrated in such a small blade, it was enough to stand up to Saguratin. And with Warlord's automatic combat reflexes, it was successfully able to block the incoming attack. It was perhaps the only thing that could counter Koutarou now that he was moving far faster than any human had the reaction time to handle.

"Anyone else would say the same thing!"

"I guess that's just where we see things differently!"

Once their blades met, it was simply a matter of who could overpower the other. And unfortunately in a contest of pure strength, the five meter tall robotic giant certainly had the advantage. Koutarou kept on his feet, but slid along the ground as Warlord pushed him back. Then he moved some of the spiritual energy focused in Saguratin to his left hand.

“Huh?!”

Crackle!

Koutarou’s left gauntlet created a powerful electric shock. With the spiritual assistance he was being granted in the cemetery, it was on a completely different level from anything he could have created on his own. But just before he discharged the shock, Warlord backed off. As a result, the electricity mostly diffused in the air. What did manage to hit Warlord wasn’t powerful enough to overcome its insulation.

“That was close, Koutarou-kun. But thanks for reminding me you had that trick up your sleeve.”

“Damn, I was so close...”

“Koutarou, Koutarou! Be careful!”

Koutarou suddenly heard Sanae’s voice in his head. She was fighting the DKI combat squad alongside the spirits, so she was communicating with him from a distance using her psychic powers.

“He probably knows how you’re going to attack.”

“Really?”

“Your psychic powers are so powerful that the... spiritual energy sensor? He has something that can tell exactly what you’re doing.”

If spiritual energy pooled in Saguratin or the gauntlet on his left hand, it was clear that they were going to be used to attack. But now vast amount of spiritual energy was surging through Koutarou’s entire body, and by monitoring that flow, it was easy to tell when he was going to go on the offensive.

“Ah, so that’s how it is, Elexis.”

“Oh? What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about how you and that machine are reading my movements.”

“My, it looks like I’ve been found out.”

It was true. Warlord was able to automatically stop Saguratin with its knife both by using the cameras it had equipped to monitor Koutarou’s physical moments and the sensors it had installed to monitor the flow of his spiritual energy. That was how, despite the strength of Koutarou’s attacks, Warlord was able to effectively block them.

“And Koutarou, everyone else is in a tight spot right now. They’re going to be in trouble soon. They haven’t lost yet, but at this rate they’re going to get seriously hurt, or even...”

The worst news of all was that the other girls were nearing their limits. In terms of winning or losing, there was still wasn’t a decided advantage on either side. But things were getting dangerous. Both friend and foe were accumulating damage, and the next hit could be fatal for any one of them. If victory over DKI came at the cost of casualties among the girls, it was a victory no one would celebrate.

“Looks like time’s up, Elexis. We’re going to have to finish this.”

Koutarou’s spiritual energy was being read by his enemy and his friends were in danger. There was a single solution to both problems. That was to flare up all of the spiritual energy within his body and keep it at maximum levels so that there would be no discernable increase or decrease regardless of what he did. But considering how much spiritual energy it would consume to do something like that, he knew he’d only get one shot at it.

“I thought you’d say something like that. Normally I wouldn’t play along... but I’m in no position to take things too leisurely either. So we’ll see this through to the end together, Koutarou-kun.”

Warlord’s sensors started to detect that Koutarou’s spiritual energy levels were rapidly increasing. Normally running around and getting him to waste that spiritual energy would be the best option, but Elexis was eager to settle their match for his own reasons. Warlord was the very definition of cutting-edge technology, but the frame of the machine itself was reaching its operational limit.

Besides, Maya and the others are probably tapping themselves out too... though she would be offended if I suggested that.

Elexis was concerned about his allies too. For their safety and his own, he was ready and willing to bring his fight with Koutarou to a swift end.

“I don’t care if the generator core burns out. We’re going all out, Warlord!”

Koutarou’s spiritual energy blazed, and Warlord’s generator roared. This would be it for both of them. Koutarou and Elexis were going to put everything they had into a single attack and go toe to toe with each other for once and for all.

“Hyaaaaaaaah!”

“Hyaaaaaaaah!”

They came at each other, and since they were both moving at superhuman speeds, the distance between them closed in an instant.

I’ll knock Koutarou-kun’s sword away with the knife and finish him with the energy knuckles!

Apart from what was being used to move, Elexis put all of Warlord’s energy into its arms. His intuition told him that Koutarou was going to use Saguratin. In response, he’d repel it with the knife in his right hand and settle the match with a high energy punch from his left hand. Elexis was convinced that Warlord, strengthened time and time again for this very fight, would be able to defeat Koutarou that way.

“Hyaaaaah!”

And just as Elexis had predicted, Koutarou struck out with Saguratin. Following his movements, Warlord calculated the trajectory of the sword swing and where it would need to hold the knife to block it accordingly.

“You lose, Koutarou-kun! You were too obsessed with being a knight!”

Warlord reacted on its own and stuck out the knife to catch Saguratin. Then it was just a matter of deflecting it to the side and landing a solid

blow to end their showdown. The last of its energy should be enough to crush Koutarou.

“No! You were the one who was too obsessed, Elexis!”

Crack!

The instant the knife touched it, Saguratin’s blade broke in half. In that exact moment, Koutarou wasn’t putting any spiritual energy into it. But once the sword was broken and had gotten past the knife, Koutarou poured as much spiritual energy as he could into the sword again. When he did, a golden glow appeared in place of the blade where it had broken off. It was so powerful that Saguratin now looked like a beam sword.

“Impossible! You’d sacrifice your—”

“It’s over!”

The golden blade born from the prayers and hopes of many slammed into the totally defenseless Warlord. Its fist never even had a chance to strike.

After being hit by Saguratin’s full power, small explosions went off left and right in Warlord’s frame as it fell backwards. The next moment, the safety device activated and the front of the armor was blown off. Now defeated and lying on his back, Elexis looked up into the starry sky gradually fading into the light of the rising sun.

“...So I lost in the end, huh...”

Elexis had no regrets. He truly had given it his all. If that wasn’t enough, there was nothing he could do. Especially not against the Blue Knight.

“Elexis.”

Suddenly part of his view was obscured, hiding a number of the stars overhead. Someone was looking down at Elexis.

“Is that you, Koutarou-kun?”

The person looking down at him was indeed Koutarou. He was covered in wounds and didn’t look too much better off than the injured and collapsed

Elexis, but neither the light of his sword nor the light in his eyes had weakened any. That was the sole difference between them now.

“You lose. Give up.”

“Yeah, I give up. I lost.”

“Good.”

Chink...

With Elexis finally surrendering, Koutarou sheathed Saguratin. The long battle between them was over at last.

“However... I didn’t lose to you. I only lost to the great will of the people trying to protect this country.”

“I think you’re right.”

Both Alaia and the spirits of the cemetery played a major role in this battle. They were all desperate to protect their country, and that meant defeating Elexis. If it had just been Koutarou and the other girls against DKI, the win likely would have gone to Elexis. Even Koutarou knew that.

“Elexis, can I ask you one last thing?”

There was something that had been on Koutarou’s mind ever since Elexis and his associates chased them down at the cemetery. Before leaving, he wanted to ask Elexis about it.

“I don’t mind. What is it?”

“Why didn’t you use any huge weapons or major explosives? You might have won if you’d used those when you first caught up with us.”

At that point, Elexis’s side definitely had them outnumbered. If Elexis had used something like the Type One Revised or a large enough bomb, Koutarou and the others wouldn’t have stood a chance. Koutarou wanted to know why Elexis hadn’t gone that far.

“In the middle of the suburbs? Don’t be ridiculous. The casualties would be too high.”

Evil had its way of blooming. That's what Elexis believed. Since he was trying to end the imperial government, Elexis was willing to use any means necessary against the current royalty. The way he manipulated Ceilēshu in exchange for treating her father was a good example of that. But since it was all for the sake of creating a better society, needless sacrifice had to be avoided. Elexis was never interested in wanton destruction.

"...It might not have been so bad to lose to you after all."

Elexis was an unforgivable enemy. As long as he considered it necessary, he was willing to force sacrifice onto others. But that being said, there was a method to his madness and he was not cruel without reason. Once the bloody upheaval and all the fighting was over, there was a chance that he could actually create a good government. That's why Koutarou thought it was a shame that he and Elexis would never see eye to eye. They were simply walking different paths.

"Vandarion won't be the same way."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Past Elexis was Vandarion. And unlike Elexis, Vandarion was both mad and evil, through and through. He was the worst kind of enemy imaginable, and he wouldn't hesitate to leave a path of destruction in his wake whether or not he got what he wanted. If Koutarou treated him like Elexis, he'd easily be defeated. Koutarou knew that, and he heeded Elexis's warning.

"See you, Elexis."

Koutarou turned his back to Elexis. There was no longer anything to say. It was time to return to the people who waiting for him. But after taking a few steps, Elexis called out to him again.

"Koutarou-kun, are you sure you shouldn't kill me?"

"Who do you think I am?"

Koutarou stopped moving as he answered. Since he'd once had a similar conversation with someone, Koutarou felt a sense of nostalgia stir within him.

“Yes... of course. Heh, hahahaha!”

Koutarou began walking once more, and the light of the rising sun illuminated his silhouette. He could still hear Elexis behind him, but he wasn’t planning on stopping again. On his way to the girls, Maya and Darkness Rainbow passed by him, but neither side did anything. Their business with each other had been settled.

Shortly thereafter, what sounded like cheers of victory could be heard coming from afar. Koutarou couldn’t tell if the voices were real or not, but thinking that it would be nice if they were, he raised his fist into the air in a gesture of inexpressible gratitude and camaraderie.

After the battle, Koutarou passed out from his injuries and exhaustion. It caused quite a commotion among the invader girls, but it was nothing compared to the commotion when he came to.

“Owowow, that hurts! I told you I’m injured!”

“I don’t care! You made me worry so much!” Theia shouted.

“I told you that I’d put you in a scorpion lock if you left me behind again!” Sanae shouted too.

“Gyaaaaaaaah!”

What awaited Koutarou when he awoke was a flurry of jeering and unjust violence. To make matters worse, Nana was the only one willing to defend him.

“Everyone, Satomi-san had his reasons, so maybe we shouldn’t be so unreasonable...”

“That just means that Satomi-san doesn’t trust us at all!” Yurika cried.

“I was even prepared to die for Master’s sake,” Ruth declared.

“It’s his fault that I gained weight! Take responsibility, Satomi-kun!” Shizuka fussed.

Out of the six girls who’d been left behind, Theia and Sanae were the only ones using force. Yurika, Ruth, and Shizuka just gave him dirty looks from across the room as they complained. Meanwhile, the three girls he’d actually taken with him showed no signs of taking Koutarou’s side.

“While it’s true that the most tight-lipped members were needed so that DKI wouldn’t realize anything, you still deeply wounded all of their maiden hearts,” Kiriha said admonishingly.

“It would have been an honor to die by your side. I’m glad that I went with you, but the other girls didn’t even have the chance. I think that’s unfair,” Maki said calmly.

“I’m in favor of giving Veltlion a hard time regardless!” Clan sneered.

“Y-You guys!”

Koutarou had only taken Kiriha, Maki, and Clan with him in order to keep their mission top secret. If Elexis and his associates had found out that Koutarou's goal was to collect on his salary before he was even acknowledged as the Blue Knight, their entire plan would have been ruined. Koutarou had specifically chosen the three girls he'd taken with him because he knew there was no chance of them accidentally tipping off Elexis and his network. They were each skilled in the ways of strategy.

Theia was Elfaria's daughter, so taking her with him was out of the question. Harumi was recovering, so she too was out of the question. Out of the remaining four—Sanae, Yurika, Shizuka, and Ruth—only the prudent Ruth could be trusted to go with them. However, Koutarou knew that since he was taking Clan and Kiriha, he needed to leave Ruth with the other girls. He also knew that if anything went wrong and they had to escape, the fewer people they had with them, the better.

"If you'd at least given everyone a kiss goodbye, nobody would have complained!" Sanae continued to rail against him.

"She's right! You should have kissed us all goodbye!" Theia backed her up.

"Don't be so unreasonable!" Koutarou did his best to defend himself.

"Anyways, Layous-sama, don't you think you should at least properly apologize to Harumi-san and thank her?" Elfaria piped up.

"Ugh..."

Elfaria hit Koutarou right in his weak spot. It was only thanks to Harumi—thanks to Alaia—that their grand plan had even been possible in the first place. And even though he knew that, Koutarou hadn't told her anything. He'd also taken Signaltin with him to prove his identity. He was aware that he'd basically used her condition as an excuse to keep her in the dark while he took advantage of what she'd done for him. So the short of it was that Elfaria was right. The least he could do for her now was explain himself.

"Sakuraba-senpai."

"Y-Yes?"

The memories of Alaia's that Harumi had inherited were the ones stored in Signaltin, meaning they only went up until she parted ways with Koutarou. The rest was lost when she was reincarnated, which is why she didn't know anything about what Alaia had done after that day. She herself didn't know about the salary until someone explained it to her. As such, even though it was evident she'd done something great to help Koutarou, it still didn't feel real to her. Between that and knowing that Koutarou had chosen to leave her behind, a sense of unease and powerlessness smoldered within her.

"Um, Senpai, I'm sorry for leaving without telling you anything. I was sure that if I explained the salary to you, you'd feel responsible..."

"Am I necessary? Am I a necessary girl to you, Satomi-kun?"

"Well, of course. Even without Signaltin, I want you to be healthy. That's why, um... I'm really sorry for leaving without saying anything."

"Then you should have just said that you were leaving me behind because I'm precious to you. If you'd said that, I would have just waited like normal. Jeez..."

Tears began to fall from Harumi's eyes, but they were happy ones. Finally hearing that she was necessary, that she was important and needed, lifted a dark weight off of her soul. The joy and relief she felt at that escaped her eyes in the form of tears.

"You helped me out a lot, Sakuraba-senpai."

"Nincompoop. Satomi-kun, you nincompoop..."

Still crying, Harumi frowned and voiced her discontent like a child. It was a rare sight for her, and it made it painfully clear to Koutarou just how badly he'd made her feel.

"Don't get angry. Please forgive me, Senpai."

"Nincompoop, nincompoop!"

"Well, are you on our side now, Harumi?" Theia asked.

"Yes, I think so... Satomi-kun, you nincompoop!"

“Gyaaaaaaaah!”

After Harumi joined in and put Koutarou in an arm lock, things turned chaotic. Koutarou was assaulted from all sides with insults and wrestling moves for a good hour or so before anyone was ready to forgive him.

Still acting as regent empress, Ceilēshu put what she had said at the press conference into action. First she formally ordered the Reborn Forthorthian Army and the Imperial Army to cease all hostile actions and stand down. Next she put utmost care into choosing unbiased personnel for Elfaria’s trial so it could be carried out fairly. She also requested that the Imperial Army submit the evidence they were using to denounce Elfaria. The outcome of this war would now be decided in the courtroom rather than on the battlefield. It was an extremely just approach, and most of the citizens were happy with Ceilēshu’s decision.

“Curse you, Blue Knight! To think he’d make a move like this...”

Clatter!

Almost everything atop Vandarion’s desk was knocked to the floor with a violent swing of his arm. Books, pens, bottles, and the like rolled across the carpet, some of which had cracked in the fall.

Vandarion believed that the current situation was Koutarou’s doing. He was sure he’d arranged the royal family meeting from the shadows and set it up to his own advantage. He didn’t suspect DKI’s involvement, and since Koutarou had now taken over DKI, he would never figure it out.

“So what will you do, Vandarion-sama?”

Vandarion was refusing to submit the evidence Ceilēshu asked for. The documents they had were meticulous, but they were still somewhat inconsistent with reality. A thorough investigation would reveal that they were fabricated. Any judge under Vandarion’s thumb, however, still would have found Elfaria guilty. But now with the court reshuffling, submitting the fabricated evidence would be the first step towards his downfall. Once it was exposed, he would be the one arrested and put on trial.

And so Vandarion was left with two choices: accept defeat and submit the evidence, or start a real coup d'etat. That was the ultimatum he was faced with now.

"We'll fight, Granado! As if I'd give up now! I'll do whatever it takes to kill the Blue Knight and crush Elfaria! I will stand at the top of Forthorthe! I don't care what disgrace I may suffer along the way!"

Vandarion was resolute. He was determined to become the ruler of Forthorthe, and he would strive for that until the bitter end. He'd rather become the worst dictator in the history of Forthorthe than submit to the loathsome Blue Knight and Elfaria. He had every intention of clawing his way onto the throne, regardless of the price of doing so.

Afterword

Long time no see. It's the author, Takehaya. This time I've safely delivered *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* volume 25.

Time sure flies. We're already on volume 25. Since I submitted my first proposal to the editorial department in 2007, this feels like the tenth anniversary to me. For you guys though, the tenth anniversary is a still little bit down the road. I've kept up a publishing pace of three volumes a year (although it's been hastened from time to time), so when the thirtieth volume is released in the form of volume 28, that should be right around the time of the series' official tenth anniversary. The *Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Hercules!* chapters being released on the web are piling up, so I think we'll make it to volume 28. Of course, if we only have one more volume left, that might not happen (ha!). Actually, there's a reason I'm bringing that up.

This work has a defined ending, and this volume made some progress towards that ending. I think those of you with good intuition probably already caught on to that. So while I won't say when, this series will eventually come to a close. That alone is for certain.

Once that ending has been reached, Koutarou and the others will of course live normal lives. Or perhaps not, but at least they would be more normal than they are now. Specifically speaking, the legend of the Blue Knight, including the modern-day parts, will be turned into a movie in Forthorthe. The Blue Knight himself will be asked to appear. And when spring comes

around, McKinley, who's a high school student now, will visit room 106. I think there will be stories like that. Of course, there will be some danger now and again such as the remnants of the radical faction attacking. But what I want to ask is if readers would like to see a bit more of the normal lives of Koutarou and the others.

And once the main story is over, "what if" stories might be nice too. For example, "Koutarou has begun going out with X!" Ah, but if I start on a "what if" series like that, I'd have to make one for everyone (ha!). Apart from that, there might be a story about what happened to Alaia in a world where Koutarou never came to the past, "The Sword Princess and the Dragon Knight." In a "what if" series, I could even revive the story about Space Detective Mackenzie that might have happened if the series had stopped at volume 3. I feel like there's a lot that could be done in that vein.

I think stories like this could be used to fill the second halves of volumes with three chapters from *Hercules!* Of course, if they become too long, that would be a silly approach. For example, "The Sword Princess and the Dragon Knight" would never work as a second part. It would have to be its own book. Maybe even two.

But the idea is that I don't want to release a volume with six stories from *Hercules!* Personally, I think at least half of the volumes should be new content, so I don't want to let the *Hercules!* stories pile up too much. However, as I'm pondering what kind of new content should go in too, I thought I might as well ask you guys.

Below the colophon at the end of the original printed book (the page that has the name and address of the publisher in large print) is a questionnaire. If possible, I would really appreciate it if you would take a look at it and let us know what you think and if you'd like to see some "what if" stories or not on the line that reads "the future of *Rokujouma!?*" For those that don't have access to it or can't find it, if you tweet your thoughts with the hashtag #theFutureofRokujouma (#六畳間の今後), I believe the editor in charge, S-kun, will take a look at it. I don't mind which method you use, but please help out if you can.

S-kun is personally pushing for "what if" stories featuring the various heroines with limited edition boxes for each heroine containing the book and some goods. It would probably work the same way as the special editions did with the drama CDs. You'd just get the goods instead of a

drama CD. In regards to this, you can also let us know what you think in the questionnaire or on Twitter. Also let us know what kinds of goods you'd be interested in seeing. If the voices asking for them are loud enough, it might just become reality (ha!). Personally, on top of what I described above, I think special game books would be fun to bundle as the second part of the *Hercules!* chapters. It would be about the right length to use, and if they're not too complicated, the digital versions could handle them too. It might go something like this.

Start from 1.

1

Satomi-san, you and the others set foot in an old European style mansion. The inside is dim, musty, and dusty. On the wall in front of you hangs an old painting—an old painting of a young woman.

"In movies or games, a ghost would definitely come out of this painting."

"Like this?"

"Kyah! S-Sanae, think of the time and place!"

"Heehee, sorry!"

There is only one door from the entrance leading further inside. Based on the rough map you have, past that should be a long hallway with several rooms.

If you examine the painting of the woman, go to 2. If you open the door and head into the hallway, go to 3.

2

The woman in the painting suddenly opens her eyes wide and glares at Satomi-san.

“All of you will die here! Just like I did!” a very eerie voice from the painting cries.

“...”

“...”

“...Hmph.”

Waaaaah...

“‘Hmph’ is all you have to say? This is your fault, Sanae! You spoiled the surprise for everyone, so of course she’s disappointed!”

“Heehee, sorry.”

Since Sanae apologized, I’m going to give you a hint. The woman in the painting is reaching out for something. It seems she was trying to grab a silver knife, but died before she could get it.

“In other words, if we want to survive, we need to search for the silver knife.”

“Good thing we have such an easy game master.”

“Koutarou, aren’t you casually being the worst?”

Okay, then what do you want to do now? If you want to examine the painting a little more, go to 4. If you think that’s enough, leave the room and go to 3.

3

There’s no lock on the door, so it opens easily with a turn of the knob, but it lets out a loud creak as it slowly opens. Past the door is a dim hallway with two doors on each side.

“All right, men, follow me!”

“Theia, are you sure? You’ve seen several films with setups like this from Earth, right?”

“That’s right! The head and caboose of the group always die!”

“Hmm... Then how about walking shoulder to shoulder?”

Please stop! Pretty please stop! This is just getting complicated!

“Looks like there’s a trap ahead.”

“Wouldn’t it be an ambush?”

“How about throwing my grenade? That should do the trick either way.”

“Why do you have something like that?!”

“I got it in the last scenario and kept it. Look, it says so right here on my character sheet.”

“It’s true! It’s written on her character sheet, Koutarou!”

Waaaaah...

“Give her a break. You should be more mature, Theia.”

“Fine. I guess I’ll play along...”

Okay, then what do you do next? If you want to examine the doors one at a time, go to 6. If you want to make sure that there aren’t any traps, go to 9.

And so on and so on. The concept is a tabletop RPG where Yurika is the game master.

The truth is that I’ve always been trying to think of a way to get the readers to feel like they’re part of Koutarou and the girls’ games. This was sort of an idea I had for that. Not everyone would have access to a video game or something like that, but every reader would have the book, of course. And since it would be the complement to a *Hercules!* volume, the editorial department might not get too mad if it’s just a one-off. I think it’s pretty feasible, so if any of you would be interested in something like that, please let S-kun know through the questionnaire or Twitter.

Now then, that's enough of talk about the future. Let's come back to the present. Thanks to an excellent strategy, Koutarou and the others were able to counteract the intervention of Elexis and the evil magical girls. In volume 26, we'll have the decisive battle against Vandarion.

Thanks to the events of volume 25, a lot of Vandarion's power has been stripped away, but he hasn't given up just yet. He'll attack using all kinds of methods in an attempt to kill Koutarou and defeat the royal families. Unlike Elexis and the others, Vandarion's faction won't hesitate to use any means necessary. There's no doubt that their battle will be a fierce one. Just how will Koutarou and the others fight against them when they can't use Signaltin? Please look forward to the story accelerating towards the end of the Forthorthe arc.

Now I'm all out of space for the afterword. I had a lot of space for it this time thanks to the way the book printing turned out, but I think I managed to fill it up well. And that said, we're already at the end of it. I would like to, from the very bottom of my heart, thank the editorial department who works with me to publish every volume; Poco-san who worked hard to fulfill my even more specific than usual specifications; and all of you, my readers with this volume in hand.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 26.

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Takehaya